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The Public Perils of Statistics and How to Survive Them

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Reviewed by Dr, Jairo Lugo, Director of Journalism Studies, University of Stirling

Blastland: We should be modest and accept that uncertainty is a fact

Journalists, politicians and experts should be more open with the public and admit that the data is in some cases inconclusive. That would greatly improve the trust in numbers. That at least is the suggestion of writer and broadcaster Michael Blastland when delivering the lecture ‘The Public Perils of Statistics and How to Survive Them’.

Blastland was the key note speaker at postgraduate training programme organised by the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) between the 11th and 13th of May in Edinburgh. The creator of Radio 4’s More or Less programme argued that journalists and politicians tend to draw conclusions from data without taking into account the variability and uncertainty that characterises a wide range of statistics.

“Journalists tend to use statistics to reinforce their own views and pre-conceptions of reality. They take data that can fit in their own narrow scope of what the story should say. It has to fit the format of news stories that have a beginning and an end”, said Blastland.

In so doing, argues the broadcaster, journalists are not reporting accurately the events and phenomenon that they are trying to describe or analyse.

However, this is not only a problem of journalists. According to Blastland, ‘public confidence in climate change science would be greatly improved if there was more openness about its own uncertainties. This is not me saying that but John Beddington the Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government’.

‘We should just admit to the public that there will be uncertainty in the data that we are providing and recognise our limitations in explaining certain phenomenon’

Speaking to an audience of statisticians and students, Blastland explained however how some institutions and journalists are starting to recognise these limitations. “The Bank of England, for example, is among the first institutions in Britain that has started to show uncertainties in it’s



reports and documents to the public and to the media”.

The political class needs to be convinced to accept uncertainty in certain matters, argues the BBC Radio 4 presenter. There needs to be a sense of error in which we should be clear that the data is just inconclusive.

This event proved extremely popular and was attended by over 100 delegates from

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academia, public services and the private sector. Many thought-provoking examples of the misuse of statistics to create ‘stories’ were provided, and statisticians were urged to consider how best to survive and thrive with numbers in the world of public argument. The talk prompted a wide range of questions and discussions continued late into the evening during a wine reception.