

# Politics and Policy of Building Trust in Statistics

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*Luis A. Avilés*  
*University of Puerto Rico*

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# Purpose of APHA Statistics Section

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## FOCAL POINT

- identification of issues
- development of strategies
- promotion of activities

in the area of statistics for public health.

What if citizens do not have trust in official statistics?

# Objectivity of Numbers

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Numbers (statistics) appeal to objectivity

Why?

- Knowledge becomes impersonal
- Introduce distance from the object
- Universality of language of numbers

# Objectivity

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## Absolute Objectivity

- difficult to sustain

## Disciplinary Objectivity

- consensus among practitioners of a discipline

## Mechanical Objectivity

- personal restraint through use of rules

# Objectivity and Trust

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TRUST is a social and moral problem

Related to:

- Mechanical objectivity
- Consistency with other sources
- Reputation of individuals

# Technologies of Trust

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Technology:

Making and using of artifacts for rational efficient actions

Artifacts:

□ material objects:

machines, tools, utilities, etc.

□ knowledge:

rules, strategies, recipes, plans, theories, etc.

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# Theories of technology

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- Technologies are never neutral
- Technologies are filled with politics

# Problem under study

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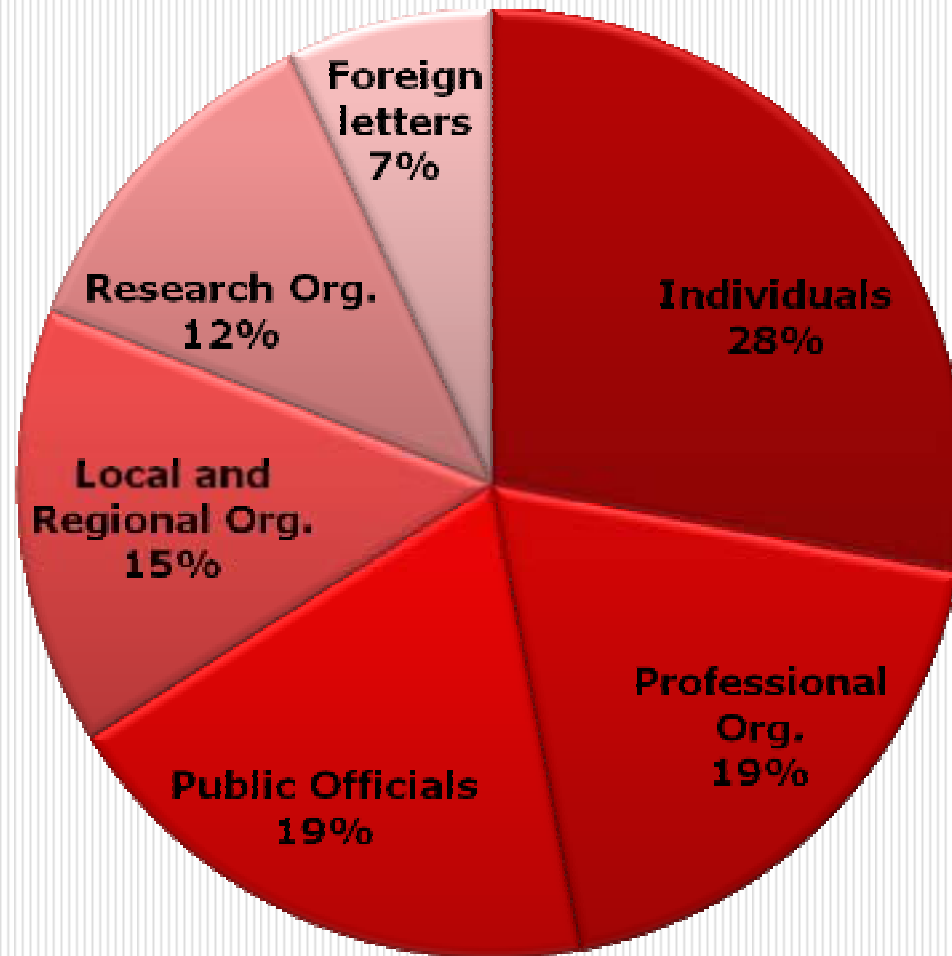
## United Kingdom Consultation: Independence for Statistics

- ❑ Specific proposal of government to build trust in statistics
- ❑ Request for opinions
- ❑ 78 opinions were sent
- ❑ Great degree of consensus



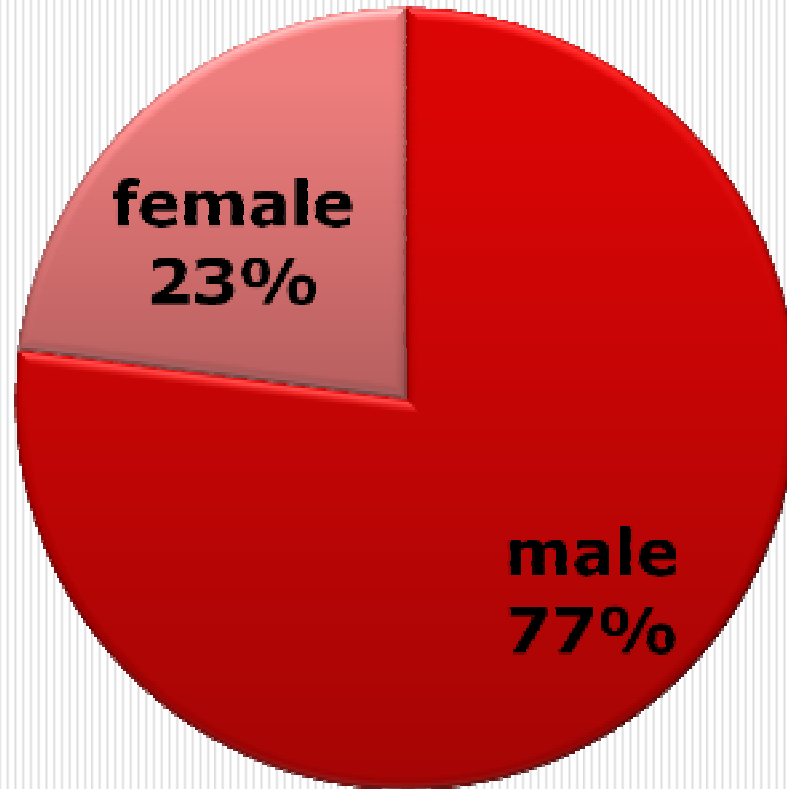
# Who sent Opinions (n=78)

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# Gender of opinion writers (n=78)

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# Erosion of Public Trust

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Not related to individual statisticians

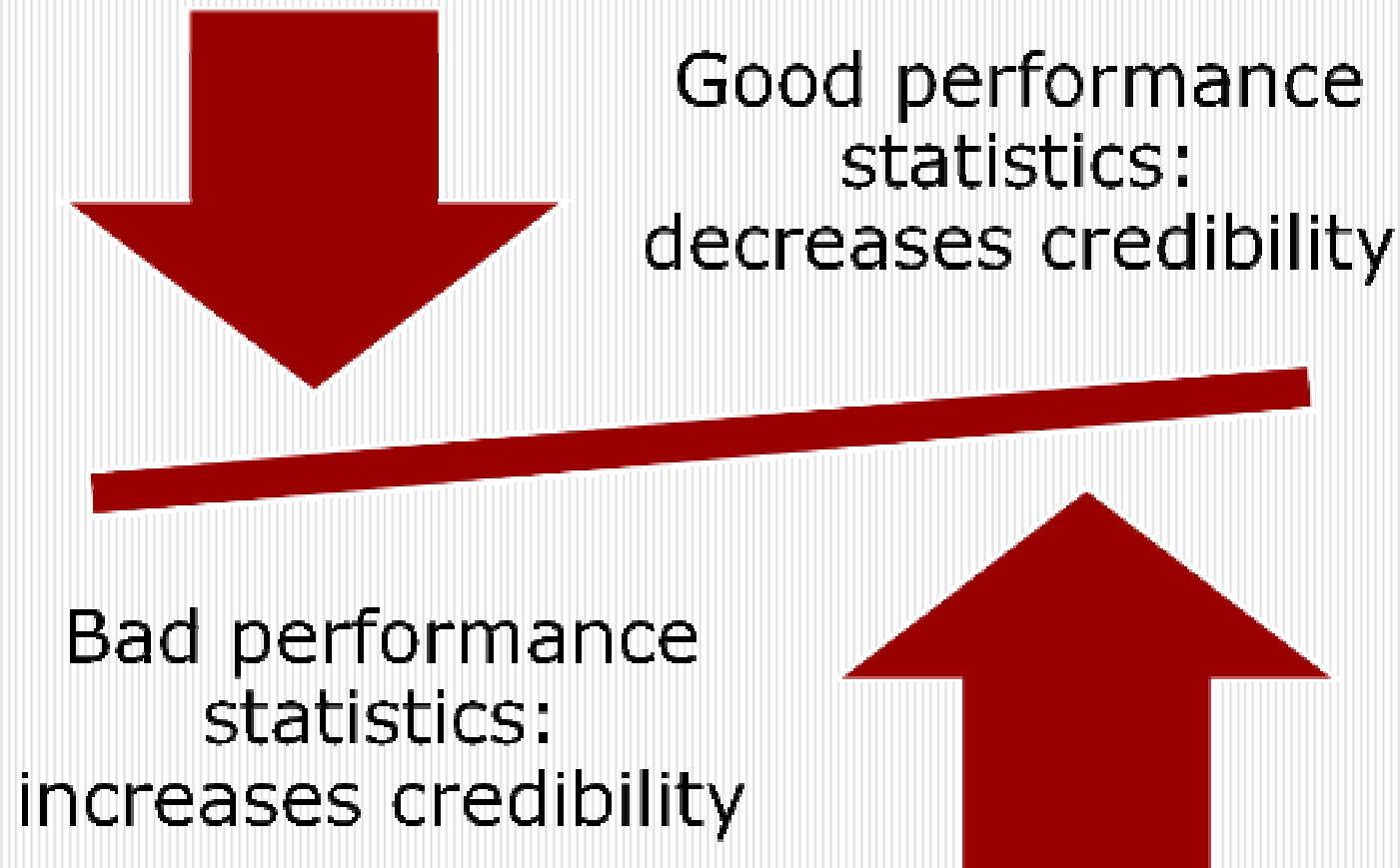
Not related to mistakes  
of the Office for National Statistics

Inherent problem of government  
credibility

SPIN and performance indicators

# Government's motivation to be re-elected

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# Erosion of Trust - 1

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## SPIN:

- ❑ A public relation concept.
- ❑ A biased portrayal of a phenomenon in one's own favor through deception.
- ❑ Proliferation of “spin doctors”

# Erosion of trust - 2

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- tunnel vision
- statistical myopia

# How to improve trust?

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## Technologies of Governance

Crux of the trust issue:

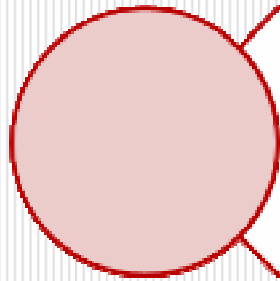
Who control the production of statistics?

Current political struggle

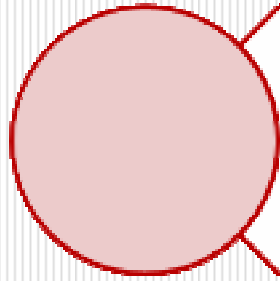
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# Adoption of Technologies of Trust

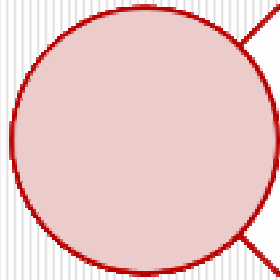
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Public distrust



Active civil society



Democratic  
government



# Who exerts control over statistics?

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1. Make the Office of National Statistics (ONS) a Non-Ministerial Department (not under executive branch).
2. ONS should be accountable to Parliament (legislative branch).

# Bureaucratic Design

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## National Statistician

- Service delivery
- Appointed by mechanism that elicits wide support.

## Independent Commission (Board)

- Statistics Policy
  - Oversight statistical procedures
  - Process of nomination – Credibility
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# Ministers' privileges

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Should ministers have pre-release access to data?

- Current source of SPIN
- Ministers tell how to interpret data before it is released
  
- No pre-release access to data

# Budget

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A crucial way of exerting control

- Secure and stable
- Transparent

# Regional and local governments

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- ❑ ONS must guarantee relevance for local interests
- ❑ ONS must assure the coherence of U.K. wide results.

# Decentralized production within central government

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De-centralized production of statistics  
assure relevance for policy making

Issues:

- Is there independence of statisticians within the ministries?
- Press releases should be signed by a statistician

**UNRESOLVED ISSUE**

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# Political Implications

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Is government creating a  
“statistical Frankenstein”?

A technology (machine) that turns  
against its creator.

Citizen’s demands for technologies of trust  
could be sabotaged with lot’s of spin.

# Conclusion

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- Is it possible to separate trust in government from trust in Statistics?
- Can trust in statistics be achieved through adequate mechanism for the governance of statistics?

The U.K. experience will let us know.

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