

Nine Out of Ten Statistics are Taken Out of Context

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It is not an uncommon occurrence for the media to report an event without providing sufficient context needed to provide a full understanding of a given issue. In a similar vein, the article *Nine Out of Ten Statistics are Taken Out of Context* by Lovell-Badge (2013) identifies that statistics are more often cited to support a given cause without providing the context necessary for an individual to make an informed decision. Nevertheless, many individuals are willing to accept a reported statistic as factual without regard to the context of the data.

Article Review

After reviewing the article *Nine Out of Ten Statistics are Taken Out of Context*, I am not surprised by the information presented by Lovell-Badge (2013). My opinion stems primarily from having developed a significant degree of cynicism towards the news media throughout my law enforcement career. Additionally, my general perception is that many individuals who support a given issue, as exemplified by animal rights activists in this article, often ignore certain facts which do not align with their passionate views. Although this is not intended to imply that all causes are unjust or that everyone associated with a special interest group is not being factual in their claims, I tend to view their reported statistics as being somewhat biased.

Many individuals readily accept reported statistics as being factual and are seemingly unconcerned with devoting any measure of thought towards determining the credibility of a stated percentage in context of the overall issue. One consideration associated with the apparent willingness to accept most any statistic as factual can be attributed to the sheer volume of information and statistics which an individual is confronted by during the course of their daily life. The somewhat overwhelming barrage of 24-hour news coverage and readily available access to digital media has, to some extent, created a sense of apathy in many Americans regarding events

in their lives for which they have no direct means of control. The result is that many individuals are more likely to accept even the most implausible statistical references at face value without questioning the context of the claim when reported by multiple sources (Best, 2012).

Statistics Taken Out of Context

Politicians are noted for using statistical references to shape the opinions of their constituents. A frequent example of presenting statistics out of context involves issues associated with local, state and federal budget deficits. In the last presidential election, a campaign advertisement identified that a candidate's state had incurred eighteen billion dollars in debt during their term as governor (Acosta, 2012). In actuality, the amount of debt was already at a higher level than any other state when the individual initially assumed office, and the deficit only rose sixteen percent during the course their term as governor (Acosta, 2012). However, by using the total dollar amount of debt in the campaign advertisement and ignoring the specific statistical reference to the relatively low sixteen percent increase, the inference was that the entire state budget deficit was the fault of the presidential candidate.

An additional area in which statistics are often cited without presenting the issue in proper context involves the media's desire for attention-grabbing headlines. A recent USA Today headline indicated that the number of young Americans living with their parents had increased forty-eight percent since 1970 (Groom, 2006). One of the issues that the article failed to disclose was that the population of the United States had also increased thirty-two percent during the same period (Groom, 2006). When the percentage of young Americans living with their parents is then considered in context of the overall population, the resulting sixteen percent figure is not nearly as newsworthy as the reported forty-eight percent increase.

Media Issues

An increasing concern with the media is not whether an issue should be reported, but rather the sensationalist manner in which many events are portrayed (Grabe, 2001). Media accounts often appear to be more focused upon increasing audience share rather than providing information in context of the overall issue. The result of the media sensationalizing events and failing to provide the full context of an issue has become an increasingly misinformed public (Cappella, 1996). One example of using attention-grabbing statistics by the media involves a New York Times report which identified that the obesity rate for children had experienced a forty-three percent decline over the last decade. However, in reality, this percentage represented a focused age group and was taken out of the context of the cited health care report (Kabat, 2014). Another controversial issue, as identified in a recent Tampa Bay Times article, involves gun control advocates claiming that forty percent of firearms sales are completed without background checks. While this statistic is accurate, when the issue is examined further the current statistical relevance becomes somewhat questionable considering that the data used to develop their percentage was taken from a 1994 telephone survey (Holan, 2013).

Conclusion

In today's technology-driven society Americans have become increasingly dependent upon a wide array of broadcast, print and digital media to stay informed on various topics. This change in the manner that individuals obtain information about current events has resulted in the use of attention-grabbing statistics in which the context of an issue is not sufficiently provided. Unfortunately, this failure of the media to provide the full context of an issue comes at a time that Americans have also become willing to accept opinionated rather than objective news to develop opinions on various topics (Marchi, 2012).

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