Our democracy relies on the quality of data in the public domain.

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The Royal Statistical Society recently released their Data Manifesto focussing on the potential of data to improve policy and business practice. **Hetan Shah**, *Executive Director of the Society, makes the case for doing so, arguing also that improving the country's data and statistical literacy should be a priority.*

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As the long election campaign begins, we hear claims and counterclaims from the political parties about whether or not the deficit has been halved, whether the NHS is being privatised, and whether we are being swamped by immigrants. All of these claims rely on numbers and statistics. For a quality democratic debate, we need those numbers to be sound. It is to this end that the Royal Statistical Society recently released our Data Manifesto.

Our democracy relies on the quality of data in the public domain, and the public's trust in it. To maintain public trust in statistics, we need to end the practice of pre-release access whereby some people in government see statistics before the public. The independent UK Statistics Authority should keep playing a key role in public policy, and it should continue to withdraw the designation of 'National Statistic' from any numbers that are not of high enough quality. Sir Andrew Dilnot should continue to intervene when politicians misuse statistics. And to build the public's trust around use of their data, the independent Information Commissioner's Office should be better resourced, with a sustainable funding base and greater powers to audit compliance and punish bad practices.

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Government has made a start in opening up its data, but there is more to be done in order to become transparent and encourage innovation. We look to the government to open up addressing and geospatial data as the core reference data upon which society depends, and also act as a catalyst to release economic value from other open datasets.

The Data Manifesto argues that evidence must be taken more seriously in policy formulation and evaluation, and that official statistics should be at the heart of policy debate. We know that making policy when resources are tight is difficult but perhaps more than ever in austere times choices should take into account the probable quantified consequences of alternatives. We argue that there should be further investment in investigating what policy works, including through the 'What Works' centres. Government should publish the data and evidence that underpin any new policies it announces, and should also commit to regular and long term evaluation of policies. Where we lack the data to inform choices between options in important policy areas, we should invest in getting it.

We also argue that citizens should have greater access to good-quality local data. The availability of crime and accident data has shown local communities are interested and engaged when the data is relevant to them. Central government should encourage greater publication of data at local level and build on good practice such as www.police.uk, www.datashine.org.uk and Local Government Inform.

The private sector also has an important role to play in sharing and opening its data. Companies should be encouraged to share data with researchers for research purposes, to share the data they hold about individuals with those individuals, and to publish open data for everyone, for the public good. We would like to see the rigour shown around official statistics in the public sector, and financial statements in the private sector, extended to other crucial information sources, such as the clinical trials reported by pharmaceutical companies. Private schools and hospitals and other public services provided by private providers should adhere to the same data standards and transparency as those in the public sector.

Finally, the Data Manifesto calls for improvements in statistical literacy across the board. The data is not enough. A core skill of citizenship is an understanding of basic statistical concepts and the confidence to challenge the numbers that are thrown at us every day.

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About the Author

Hetan Shah *is Executive Director of the Royal Statistical Society and you can find him on Twitter @HetanShah*