



# The Tiger That Isn't: Seeing Through a World of Numbers

*Michael Blastland , Andrew Dilnot*

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## **The Tiger That Isn't: Seeing Through a World of Numbers** Michael Blastland , Andrew Dilnot

Numbers have become the all-powerful language of public argument. Too often, that power is abused and the numbers bamboozle. This book shows how to see straight through them - and how to seize the power for yourself. Public spending, health risks, environmental disasters, who is rich, who is poor, Aids or war deaths, pensions, teenage offenders, the best and worst schools and hospitals, immigration - life comes in numbers. The trick to seeing through them is strikingly simple. It is to apply something everyone has - the lessons of their own experience. Using vivid and everyday images and ideas, this book shows how close to hand insight and understanding can be, and how we can all use what is familiar to make sense of what is baffling. It is also a revelation - of how little the principles are understood even by many who claim to know better. This book is written by the team who created and present the hugely popular BBC Radio 4 series, More or Less.

## **The Tiger That Isn't: Seeing Through a World of Numbers Details**

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# From Reader Review The Tiger That Isn't: Seeing Through a World of Numbers for online ebook

## Georgina says

This book was very clear in the maths knowledge it bestowed on its readers, and it did not require a great deal of already-established knowledge to be able to understand what it was trying to tell you. It really was a big eye-opener into the world of statistics which is around us everyday; yes, you might already be aware that the data that you read in the newspapers isn't the most accurate, but do you realise just how wrong that data could be?

The book aims to bring out the main errors that are picked up in everyday maths which should be easy enough to pick out and yet out of apathy for maths or just an unwillingness to get to grips with the numbers that are there, the errors are often portrayed as if they weren't errors at all across newspapers, newsreels and in day-to-day life.

Blastland shows that you don't need to be a genius at maths, just to understand the numbers that are thrown at you every single day, however daunting they may seem at first.

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## Simon Howard says

I first read this book in 2008, not all that long after it was released, pretty much in one go on a long haul flight. I recently came across it again, remembered the pleasure I derived from it the first time round, and so gave it a re-read.

The Tiger That Isn't provides a competent grounding in the very basics of statistical theory – risk, sampling, averages, etc – but does so in a way that is both relevant to daily life and, genuinely, laugh-out-loud funny. Blastland and Dilnot pick examples from many different spheres of life, but with a particular lean towards politics and the media, and explain the basic statistical errors underlying fallacious claims. They largely succeed in doing this in a lighthearted way, and attempt to equip readers with tools which might help them avoid similar mistakes in future.

One suggestion that I remembered from my first reading of this book is that any Government spending announcement is more easily interpreted if one divides the headline figure by 3bn, which gives an approximation of the spend per member of the population per week.

Of course, this book does not discuss statistical methods in great detail, and nor does it deal with some of the more complex statistical concepts. It does, however, give a good grounding in everyday statistics to those with a passing interest – I wish more journalists (and politicians) would give themselves a solid foundation of statistical understanding, and this is as good a place to start as any.

I very much enjoyed my re-read of this volume, and would happily recommend it to anyone with even a passing interest in the topic.

This review was originally published on my blog, at <http://sjhoward.co.uk/archive/2014/02...>

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## Michael says

Really outstanding stuff - this is a summary of the problems with statistics, and particularly with the way they're reported in the mainstream media. Blastland and Dilnot (the latter author being cruelly removed from the book's record on goodreads.com) produced a Radio 4 show about statistics called 'More or Less', and this book is a summary of some of the major issues they encountered.

I found it a truly fascinating read - it loses a star because some of the later chapters aren't as compelling as the early ones. The chapters on Correlation and Comparison tend to rehash the points that have already been made in the book, and seem like a weak conclusion for such a strong opening.

The chapter on 'Averages' is truly remarkable, and should be an essential read for every voting individual. Once you understand what is meant by the word "average", a lot of claims by politicians need to be viewed in an entirely different light. As the authors themselves say at one point, the word "average" has taken on negative connotations - but, when it comes to things like the average income (measured as the mean), around two-thirds of the population are below the average.

Similarly, the chapter on 'Targets', and the way that, in particular, British hospitals have "gamed" the system to achieve their targets, while not necessarily providing the best possible medical care for their patients, should be an essential read for voters and politicians.

Overall, a fascinating insight into the damned lies of statistics!

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## Hrishikesh says

A badly written collection of excellent ideas. The authors impart great clarity as to how numbers are to be UNDERSTOOD. A helpful guide in these data-crazy times. My gripe is that the authors try to be unnecessarily and excessively informal at times.

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## Diana says

You don't have to be well versed in statistics to enjoy Blastland and Dilnot's book *The Tiger That Isn't*. Their aim is to teach their readers how to critically examine and understand statistical claims in the news. Using a plethora of sometimes amusing, sometimes troubling examples they show how the government, the media, and special interest groups can misunderstand and misrepresent statistical analyses. I enjoyed this book and found it quite an eye opener. It's pretty scary how often statistical results are knowingly misrepresented for effect or gain. Just as often studies are incorrectly presented through ignorance.

Using simple arithmetic Blastland and Dilnot provide a few easy methods for detecting whether a statistical claim is outrageous or realistic. This book is perfect for people with just a basic mathematical background who want to learn to question the statistics they read. For those with more robust mathematical backgrounds many of the statistical concepts might be very simple, but I believe they might still enjoy the numerous

examples of statistical studies being twisted to support various agendas.

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## **Jo says**

Excellent written accessible even for a doctor with very little brain - a lot of the examples and illustrations are around health - a great introduction to sceptical thinking about statistics.

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## **Anoush Margaryan says**

This book is extremely simplistic and basic.

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## **Tim Pendry says**

This pre-Crash somewhat polemic introduction to the use and misuse of statistics in public policy and the media comes from the creators of the estimable and corrective Radio 4 Programme *More or Less*.

Since it was published, *More or Less* has been a rational thorn in the side of Government officials, campaigning NGOS and tabloid editors who misuse data knowing or unknowingly for their own purposes.

The book is a primer on or perhaps manifesto for sensible thinking about what numbers can and cannot do and we should worry if, eight years on, the basic lessons have not been learned by Government.

Every day shows us that the Press and the almost sociopathic NGOs have not learned any lessons at all. At least the two people authoring this book were standing up for intellectual integrity in 2007.

Unfortunately the book is written as if it was a leisurely radio broadcast, conversationally steering an unsatisfactory line between populism and the scientific method.

I wanted tighter editing and a less easy-going style with the space saved given over to *more* examples of public policy error and campaigning manipulation.

In the end, the style, like radio, makes the narrative a little forgettable. It does not stick in the mind as a set of techniques for critiquing public policy. Those techniques are what we really want.

Perhaps I am being unfair because a polemic may have been required in the dying days of the manipulative political culture constructed by New Labour. We have since moved on -though not as far as we could.

*More or Less* has, since then, created a very substantial body of work. It has developed a significant and educated listenership so perhaps it might not need to be written in quite this way today.

What struck me, however, was that the authors seemed terribly reluctant to stick the knife into the carcase of our political culture very deep. It was as if they did not want to burn their bridges.

What is needed now is something more brutal than this book. We need an investigation not of our ignorance but of the will to manipulate ignorance and the wider failure to educate us out of ignorance.

My reading of this book is not that people are stupid but that they are human, overwhelmed by data. They should be able to trust those they elect, give money to or who supply their information. They cannot.

The problem is only partly a matter of better education (in which the authors play their part). It is equally an issue of politics.

The public should not have to become statisticians to protect itself. The emphasis on us protecting ourselves is the wrong one - it is the elite, Government, NGO and media, that have to be brought to account.

Every time a Government or NGO or corporation or newspaper manipulates data to sell something - a policy, a cause, a product or a story - they should be called out. This book pulled its punches.

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## **Edward Janes says**

Geeking out with this book about the value of statistics but the need to be cynical of data too.

Not so much academic as full of anecdotes (eg how the average pregnancy length/projected due data should be 283 days not 280), metaphors (how sampling is like trying to drink from a firehose), and incorrect assumptions (how less splatted hedgehogs on roads may not be a sign of fewer hedgehogs but less traffic).

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## **Dima says**

This is a well-researched and illuminating book intended, as the authors say, for "consumers of numbers". Its aim is to explain where statistics and numbers that we hear and read in the media everyday come from and how they fit into the real world. To that end, I believe the book did achieve its goal. It has great examples of how numbers can be misinterpreted and misused and provides readable formulae-free explanations about what those numbers really mean.

I found the chapters explaining size (how numbers ending in "illions" are not necessarily big) and averages (how they don't necessarily represent the "normal" or what is typical) as well as the chapters on "Targets" and "Risks" very well-written with lots of relevant eye-opening examples. The chapter explaining Chance, however, was less well-written and I'd expect some readers to find it confusing. I come from a background in epidemiology and statistics, and thus, I am really well-versed in probability and chance. Yet, I didn't find the chapter explaining them the best on the subject.

Overall, the book is written in an intelligent yet understandable style. However, I did find the writing at few times long-winded, heavy, and distracting. As another reviewer suggested, it is advisable to read the book in small chunks. But that doesn't make the book any less valuable and I do recommend it not only for "consumers of numbers" but also producers of numbers, journalists, politicians, decision-makers, as well as teachers.

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## **Matt says**

A guide to thinking critically about numbers. Clear, accessible, thought-provoking, and insightful, *The Tiger That Isn't* is a must-read.

It makes the case that one doesn't have to be mathematically gifted to make sense of the seemingly baffling stream of statistics that we both demand and fear. Instead, it shows how numbers can be made meaningful by making them personal, how averages might not mean what we think they do (as it points out, most of us have an above-average number of feet), what numbers hide as well as show, and what questions to ask of the numbers we find presented on the news and in our media. It's a fascinating primer, teaching not only essential skills, but also showing up common misunderstandings and errors.

Richard Dawkins' used a term when describing his book *The God Delusion*, which aimed to promote rational and critical thought on the subject of religion: consciousness-raising. This book is a perfect example of consciousness-raising; it provides the tools to allow readers to think critically about numbers, and make decisions unobstructed by superstition and doubt. Can't recommend it enough.

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## **Zach says**

I really enjoyed this book - A very straight forward look at statistics and how they are often misused to shape our opinions and beliefs about the world. It offers a good basic understanding of statistical analysis that offers insight into what commonly reported numbers mean (and don't mean). I know I certainly read the daily newspaper with a little more attention to reported stats. To be fair, the authors really do believe in the usefulness of statistical analysis, they simply argue that you must know what you're looking at and constantly ask questions about the results. Don't worry it doesn't take a math degree to read it. In fact, it is relatively light on the innerworkings of stats. In short, a good quick easy read that hopefully well help us not get fooled by the numbers we are constantly bombarded with.

Zach

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## **Rob Adey says**

There are literally billions of books that do this kind of thing, not sure why I'm reading more, but this is OK, and kind of comforting in its examples which are all pre-2010 and the current hell in which statistics are just one of the things comprehensively melted by the jet fuel of Our Times.

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## **Jasperzelf says**

Dit boek heb ik al een paar keer gelezen en ik word er blij van. Het gaat over de statistische fouten die in de media (expres) gemaakt worden. Makkelijk geschreven en vól anekdotes die je op feestjes kan vertellen. En

meteen ben je weer scherp over dingen als gemiddelden, regression to the main, correlatiefouten, operationalisaties, schattingen en nog veel meer.

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## **Lisa says**

Maths for the layman. Simple language, practical examples. Well demonstrated points.

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