

11

Statistics, Data, Polls and Surveys

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11.1 Introduction

Accuracy, impartiality, clarity and credibility are as important when numerical values and data are deployed in the BBC's output as they are in the rest of its journalism and other output. Content makers must be rigorous in applying due scepticism. When the BBC commissions or carries out research itself, investing the BBC's authority, the audience must be able to trust what is reported.

Statistics and data are an important source of information which can result in revealing and significant output as long as the right questions are asked and there is an informed awareness of the pitfalls. Data can include information of any kind, not just statistical data, and can be acquired through many different ways such as FOI requests, leaks, scraping and open source investigation.

Using data acquired by hacking may only be justified in exceptional circumstances and would require careful consideration of the public interest. Any reliable producer of such material should be able to explain the methods and workings on which it is based.

Using statistics, data and numbers can create a sense of certainty for the audience but they are often imperfect representations and may contain inaccuracies and measurement error, so their uncertainties should be factored in.

Polls, surveys, questionnaires, phone and online votes, vox pops and focus groups can all have a useful and fruitful role in finding out what different people and groups in society think or experience. The BBC must be clear in distinguishing between the illustrative and the measurable, and precise in its use of language, to ensure the integrity of the BBC's journalism and content.

Similarly, when data—and analysis of that data—is the basis of output, content makers must ensure that the techniques and tools used are robust.

This section should be read in conjunction with Section 3: Accuracy.

11.2 Principles

- 11.2.1 The same scepticism and detachment that would be exercised in any part of the BBC's journalism must also be exercised with statistics, data, polls and surveys.
- 11.2.2 The audience should have confidence that when it reads or hears statistics from the BBC, the figures are given no more and no less weight than the evidence supports.
- 11.2.3 Statistics, data, polls and surveys should only be used where and when it is possible to provide relevant context, caveats and limitations.
- 11.2.4 It must be clear to the audience whether a poll or survey is representative or whether it is, for example, self-selecting.
- 11.2.5 The BBC does not commission voting intention polls during relevant election or referendum periods.

11.3 Mandatory Referrals— must be referred in advance

Mandatory referrals are an essential part of the BBC's editorial and compliance process and must be observed.

Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards

- 11.3.1 Any proposal to engage in the unauthorised accessing of computer systems or accounts by hacking or commissioning hacking activities by third parties must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.4.18–11.4.21

See Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.44–7.4.45

Referrals to Chief Adviser Politics

- 11.3.2 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll (or use other methods, such as data analysis) with the intention of sampling party-political support or voting intentions with regard to elections or referendums must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics for approval.
See 11.4.33
See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.3.7
- 11.3.3 Any proposal to report voting intention using research methods other than polling must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 11.4.36–11.4.37
See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.16–10.4.18
- 11.3.4 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance¹.
See 11.4.29–11.4.30
See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.19–10.4.20
- 11.3.5 Any proposal to commission any sort of survey, questionnaire, vote or focus group on matters of current public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance².
See 11.4.39–11.4.42
See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.19–10.4.20
- 11.3.6 Any proposal to lead with, or headline in any output, or push alert, the result of a single opinion poll must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 11.4.34

¹ Reference Ofcom Code Section 5 for Meaning of ‘matters of political or industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy’

² See footnote 1

- 11.3.7 Any proposal to commission polls or any sort of survey seeking the views or asking about the experiences of children and young people on any issue must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance.

See 11.4.31

See Section 9 Children and Young People as Contributors: 9.4.3, 9.4.10 and 9.4.24–9.4.25

- 11.3.8 When the BBC commissions polls, the full results and accompanying data should normally be published. Any proposal not to do so should be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

See 11.4.32

Other Referrals

- 11.3.9 Any proposal to scrape websites for data or to use data scraped or extracted by a computer programme from the public facing part of websites should be referred to Editorial Policy.

See 11.4.18–11.4.19

- 11.3.10 Any proposal to access data derived from hacks or leaks must be referred to Editorial Policy and Programme Legal Advice in advance.

See 11.4.18 and 11.4.20

- 11.3.11 Any proposal to carry out a phone, text or online (including social media) vote on any issue must be referred to the Interactivity Technical Advice and Contracts Unit (ITACU) and Editorial Policy. The appropriate approval process must be completed.

See 11.4.41–11.4.43

See Section 17 Competitions, Votes and Interactivity: 17.4.23–17.4.24

11.4 Guidelines

Statistics

- 11.4.1 When output includes statistics, they should be in context, weighed, interpreted, challenged where appropriate and presented clearly. The BBC's use of figures should give them no more and no less weight than the evidence supports.

Numbers can convey precision and certainty and, as a result, greater confidence or weight. Description of change can be made more precise and certain by adding a numerical value. However, the level of uncertainty behind statistics should also be considered carefully.

If the statistics are from the BBC's own journalism, they must be accurate and robust. Their presentation should reflect important caveats, limitations and the relevant range of evidence. These details may need to be made available to audiences to help them understand and make their own judgements on the value and weight of the statistics.

Where the BBC is reporting statistics provided or interpreted by others, such as campaign groups and charities, political parties, commercial interests or other media, it should do so with detachment and appropriate scepticism and not necessarily accept them at face value.

- 11.4.2 Even if a particular claim is well evidenced, for example from a well-conducted poll or scientific study, it may still be wrong or not give the full picture. Such a possibility should be factored into considerations of prominence. Similarly, selective quoting, often an issue in press releases, as well as false or 'rogue' findings—which can happen by chance—should be considered and sense-checked. Advice may be sought from Head of Statistics and the BBC's specialist correspondents.

This section should be read in conjunction with guidance: Reporting Statistics.

Sources of Statistics

- 11.4.3 The individual or institution providing data or statistics used by the BBC—the source—is not as important as the quality of the data or the strength of evidence behind a claim. But knowledge about the source can give important context, or a warning, about the strength or trustworthiness of the evidence. The source of any statistic used should normally be identified.

A source that is unwilling or unable to show the methods or workings behind its claim, or to demonstrate broader evidence on the topic, should be treated with caution and its evidence checked with other experts in the field.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.4.8–3.4.9

- 11.4.4 If statistics come from a source with a vested interest, it does not necessarily mean the information is unreliable, but extra care needs to be taken to check how the source has selected the evidence and presented its figures. Political parties or campaign groups will have a clear vested interest but so too might other common sources, such as think-tanks, university departments and charities.

Consideration should be given to whether a source has proved reliable in the past; advice can be obtained from Head of Statistics.

- 11.4.5 Official statistics from government departments or statistical bodies (such as the OECD or, in the UK, the ONS) are expected to be produced impartially and free from political influence. However, this is not the case in every country and may not be the case anywhere for reports or press releases based on official statistics.

In many fields, professional bodies set standards for research and statistics, for example the UK Statistics Authority or, for polling, the British Polling Council; adherence to their standards can be an indicator of reliability.

See 11.4.25

- 11.4.6 Although press releases can be the source of useful content, they can also contain exaggerations about research, using statistics selectively. Such claims should be tested appropriately rather than taken at face value.

Peer review of research published in scientific journals is an indication of reliability but does not guarantee it. Scientific research that has not yet been peer reviewed should be treated with extra caution.

Contextualising Statistics

- 11.4.7 The accurate use of statistics involves explaining any caveats and limitations where relevant; audiences should be told their significance, where appropriate, taking care to avoid giving figures more weight than can stand scrutiny.

Particular caution is required if considering using statistics in headlines, push alerts and social media generally, where including sufficient context is often not possible.

Content makers should take care with their use of language, such as in demonstrating an average, or a mean, or a median point. Using such terms interchangeably or in the wrong context can result in misleading the audience.

See guidance: Reporting Statistics 'Averages'

Percentages and Percentage Points

- 11.4.8 Percentages can be a helpful way to describe data meaningfully provided they are used correctly and properly contextualised; but sometimes it might be simpler to say, for instance, that something has doubled rather than increased by 100%.

Reporting a large percentage change in isolation may sound significant and newsworthy but it can distort scale. Audience understanding may be improved by reporting the raw numbers alongside or instead of percentage increases. For example, an

unusual type of crime might have jumped by 300% but remain relatively low in terms of the actual number of cases—say, from three to twelve.

Content producers should use the terms ‘percentage’ and ‘percentage points’ with particular care. Audiences may be misled if they are used interchangeably because they highlight two different things: relative and absolute change.

Although the context can sometimes be sufficient to make the intended meaning clear, it can help audience understanding to be more explicit. For example: a tax change from 10% to 15% is not a 5% increase in the tax rate. It is an (absolute) increase of five percentage points. In relative terms, the tax rate has gone up by half which is a 50% increase if expressed as a percentage.

Projections

- 11.4.9 Care should be taken when interpreting projections, explaining any caveats or qualifications. Projections and forecasts are typically presented as a range of possibilities because of uncertainty about future events. An appropriate range of possible views should be given, focused on the most likely number, rather than the most extreme value. Headline phrases based on the most extreme value, such as ‘up to’, ‘as much as’, ‘could rise to’, ‘could be as high as’ or ‘may reach’ should be used with particular care.

Uncertainty

- 11.4.10 The level of uncertainty behind statistics should be considered carefully and should be communicated to the audience where appropriate, using accessible and non-technical language.

There may be uncertainty about the precision of the exact value being quoted or uncertainty about the quality of the underlying data.

Reporting should acknowledge any material uncertainty, for example by avoiding comparisons or rankings, by rounding ('roughly 200,000' as opposed to '203,400' or 'more than 60%' rather than '62.5%') and by reporting ranges instead of a single number.

See guidance: Reporting Statistics

Correlation and Causation

- 11.4.11 Content makers must be careful not to assume that if two sets of data go up or down at the same time then one is necessarily causing the other. This is the difference between correlation and causation. A correlation is when two sets of data tend to move together, but causation should not be implied without a high threshold of proof. In looking for explanations of correlated data it should be considered if causation was actually examined by the study and care taken to avoid relying on preconceptions, including one's own. If there is no other evidence to support causation, the correlation should not be reported beyond its existence, unless editorially justified.

Comparisons

- 11.4.12 Comparisons can help to make more sense of numbers which may seem meaningless in isolation. However, false comparisons should be avoided, such as variations in groupings or time periods, which may risk misleading the audience. Changes and differences in measuring systems or recording standards can invalidate comparisons over time, for instance, in comparing differences between the devolved nations.

Graphs, Charts, etc

- 11.4.13 Content producers should take particular care with the use and interpretation of graphs and charts. They are helpful tools for visually displaying large amounts of data quickly, but can mislead or distort the data, for instance by the way a vertical scale is used, leaving out some data or selectively choosing start

and end dates to represent a change over time. Where graphs and charts are used, their source should always be shown.

Content makers should be mindful that using charts may appear to the audience as giving data more weight; they can be shared on social media in isolation, stripped of their surrounding context and may require the inclusion of appropriate caveats in titles, subtitles or footnotes.

Risk

- 11.4.14 The BBC should report risks in context, taking care not to worry the audience unduly. Headlines which may cause unnecessary alarm or concern should be avoided.

The reporting of risk can have an impact on the public perception of that risk, particularly with health scares or crime stories. Misleading reports regarding statistical likelihood, for instance about health risks, may cause individuals to alter their behaviour in ways that could affect their health; a report that is not explicit about the risks of being a victim of crime may increase people's fear unnecessarily.

Content makers should consider the emotional impact pictures and personal testimony can have on perceptions of risk when not supported by the balance of evidence. If a contributor's view is contrary to majority opinion, the demands of due accuracy and due impartiality may require that to be made clear.

Where the actual level of risk remains small, despite an apparently large relative increase (eg a tripling), the editorial justification of reporting such a story must be considered. Where there is editorial justification for reporting changes in risk, the level of risk should also normally be sought and included as well as the relative change.

See Section 8 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.10

Reporting of Contested Issues

- 11.4.15 The reporting of a range of contested issues, such as the economy or the extent of climate change, can be complex and rely on an understanding of accurate and meaningful statistics. Advice should be sought, where appropriate, from the BBC's specialist journalists.

In presenting such issues, it is important to ensure that legitimate choices about policy, such as on tax and debt, or on energy consumption, are not presented as imperatives or inevitabilities. Relevant context should be made clear, including where there are trade-offs in policy choices. The BBC should report uncertainty when it is relevant to an understanding of the full context.

See Section 2 Impartiality: 2.4.1–2.4.4

Data

- 11.4.16 It is important to use data for the right purposes and in the right way. Data does not just refer to numbers in spreadsheets; it can consist of text, images, video, or audio. It can be found in a variety of sources. Data can form the basis of investigations or original journalism but the following points should be considered in the first instance:

- whether a dataset can provide the answer to the editorial issue being investigated
- if the appropriate question is being asked.

In general, questions that can be answered with data are specific and measurable rather than qualitative or causal. For example, 'how many NHS trusts met targets for waiting times last year?' is more easily answerable by data than 'how well is the NHS doing?'

Using data to find a causal relationship between two factors, or to infer what might happen in the future based on what happened in the past, should be approached with caution and will require careful analysis.

See 11.4.11

The Quality of Data

- 11.4.17 Content producers should be clear about what datasets do and do not include and take into account any description of the data.

It should be clear how the data has been compiled; data analysis of social media should be treated with particular caution.

How Data is Sourced

- 11.4.18 Accessing some datasets may raise issues around privacy and the law, particularly if they are the result of a leak or of hacking by third-party individuals or groups. Before using such data consider how it was obtained and whether there is a significant public interest that justifies its use. The BBC would not normally engage in hacking or commission hacking activities by third parties.

If the data is downloaded from a website or public data store, producers should check whether they have the right to use it. Most publicly available datasets will be available under an open licence but some are not. Advice is available from the IP Legal team.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.4.6 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.44–7.4.45

- 11.4.19 Any proposal to scrape websites for data or to use data scraped from websites should be referred to Editorial Policy who will consider the public interest and the appropriateness of the method.
- 11.4.20 Any proposal to access data derived from hacks or leaks must be referred to Editorial Policy and Programme Legal Advice in advance.
- 11.4.21 Any proposal to engage in the unauthorised accessing of computer systems or accounts by hacking or commissioning hacking activities by third parties must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

How Data is Accessed and Analysed

- 11.4.22 Consider any anonymity or ‘jigsaw identification’ issues that might be caused through any combination of datasets.

In more complex data analysis, in particular those using AI, it is important to have a thorough understanding of how the tool was trained, what its accuracy and error rates are and what its limitations are.

When proposing to use AI to infer sentiment or intention—what people might be thinking or intending to do—content makers should consider whether other means are available.

How Data is Presented and Reported

- 11.4.23 The methodology used to analyse any dataset should normally be available to the audience, including any relevant uncertainty or margins of error.

Content makers using any automated analysis of data should give it a sense check and not assume it is correct, particularly if the outcomes appear unusual or surprising.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.4.8

How Data is Stored

- 11.4.24 The collection and storage of all data must be handled in accordance with data protection legislation and the BBC's data protection policies³. If it is particularly sensitive, additional encryption or security should be considered.

The original dated dataset may need to be kept to provide an unedited record of the source.

Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes, Focus Groups and Vox Pops

- 11.4.25 When the BBC is reporting research into people's views or experiences, it is important to maintain the standards of accuracy and impartiality which enable the audience to trust the reliability of the content.

In particular, polls and surveys can involve reputational risk, so care must be taken to ensure that they are not given undue weight when reported and that appropriate context and caveats are in place.

For any BBC-commissioned poll or survey, the methodology (eg online, telephone or face to face), the underlying data and the accuracy of the language used to report it, must stand up to scrutiny. Details of the raw data should normally be made available to the audience.

See 11.4.29

The BBC's reporting of a poll, survey, questionnaire or vote that it has commissioned must not suggest a BBC view on a particular policy or issue, or that it has been commissioned with the intention of influencing opinion on a current controversy.

³ See Data Protection Handbook: available on Gateway for BBC staff or via commissioning editors for independent producers; and the BBC Privacy and Cookies Policy

The strength of evidence for claims based on these research methods can often be assessed by asking:

- whether those people responding accurately reflect the wider group they are supposed to represent
- whether the responses are used accurately, reliably reflecting how the original questions were asked
- if the research studied enough people to achieve a robust response.

See 11.4.34

11.4.26 Opinion polls seek to gauge the opinions of a large group of people (eg ‘all adults,’ ‘under 35s’, or ‘parents’) by asking questions to a representative sample of them. The sample can be found either by randomly selecting members of the group or using polling panels where respondents can be selected and weighted so they reflect the demographic or other characteristics of the larger group. Polls conducted in this way can be described alternatively as surveys.

See 11.4.29

11.4.27 Content producers may also use the term ‘survey’ to refer to a different type of research, where all the members of a smaller, specific group are contacted and all are asked to respond to questions. The group can be made up of individual people, such as constituency party chairs, university vice-chancellors or members of a specific association; or it may consist of organisations, such as health trusts, local authorities, football clubs in a particular league, etc. For this type of research, statistical credibility will depend on the whole group being contacted; it will require an approved and consistent methodology and need to receive substantive responses from an agreed proportion. The robustness of such a survey will depend both on the response rate (the higher the response rate the better) and on the degree of confidence that the respondents represent the whole group (for example, that they do not over-represent one part of the country, or a particular sub-group). Where insufficient responses are received, such research may still be usable (for instance, reporting raw numbers or in gathering anecdotal information); advice is available from Editorial Policy.

See 11.4.39

- 11.4.28 Other types of research, for instance where it is self-selecting, can be a useful way to find out about the experiences of individual members of a group or, on occasion, to identify raw numbers of people; but such methodology cannot be used to gauge the opinions or experiences of the group as a whole because the people choosing to take part cannot be regarded as representative. A larger response does not make it 'more' representative. Such research may often be described by other organisations as a 'survey' or 'poll'; content makers should ensure the audience is not misled about the weight being placed on the methodology by the use of those terms.

When the BBC itself commissions or carries out such research, it should not be described as a 'survey' or a 'poll'; it may be a 'questionnaire' or a 'study', but it must be made clear to the audience if it is self-selecting and has no representative or proportionate value.

See guidance: Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

Commissioning Polls from Polling Companies

- 11.4.29 Polling can be conducted face to face, over the telephone or online. In the UK, on matters of current public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, polls should normally be commissioned using members of the British Polling Council. To commission such polls outside the UK, advice should be sought from the Political Research Unit regarding methodology and appropriate polling organisations.

Any poll commissioned jointly with another organisation must meet the requirements of due impartiality and address any potential conflicts of interest.

- 11.4.30 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance.

See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.19–10.4.20

- 11.4.31 Particular care is needed in commissioning polls seeking the views or exploring the experiences of children and young people. Any proposal to commission polls seeking the views or asking about the experiences of children and young people on any issue must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance.

See Section 9 Children and Young People as Contributors:

9.4.3, 9.4.10 and 9.4.24–9.4.25

See guidance: Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

- 11.4.32 When the BBC commissions polls, the full results and accompanying data should normally be published. Any proposal not to do so should be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

- 11.4.33 The BBC rarely commissions polls on voting intention or other indications of party-political support. The BBC never commissions polls on voting intention or other indications of party-political support during any relevant election or referendum period. Any proposal to commission an opinion poll (or use other methods, such as data analysis) with the intention of sampling party-political support or voting intentions with regard to elections or referendums must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics for approval.

See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.16–10.4.18

Reporting Opinion Polls

- 11.4.34 The result of a single opinion poll should not normally be the lead or a main headline in any output, or a push alert, unless it has prompted a story which itself merits being the lead or headlined and reference to the poll's findings is necessary to make sense of the story. Any proposal to lead with, or headline in any output, or push alert, the result of a single opinion poll must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance.

See 11.4.36

See guidance: Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

11.4.35 When reporting the findings of any opinion poll, whether commissioned by the BBC or others:

- language should not give greater credibility to polls than they merit; for example, polls ‘suggest’ and ‘indicate’, but do not ‘prove’, ‘show’ or ‘reveal’
- language used to report the findings of an opinion poll should accurately reflect the meaning of the questions asked in the original research
- small differences within the margin of error of a given poll should not, normally, be reported as a substantive difference
- the BBC should not rely only on the interpretation given to a poll’s results by the organisation or publication which commissioned it
- the BBC should report the methodology used (for instance, online, telephone or face to face), the sample size, the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it
- where editorially relevant, dates of the fieldwork and subsequent events which may have shifted opinion should be reported
- where there are doubts about the methodology of a poll or the bona fides of those carrying it out, appropriate qualifying language is essential. Advice is available from the Political Research Unit. Content makers must consider whether the findings from polls are sufficiently credible to report; advice is available from the Political Research Unit
- polls commissioned by the BBC should not normally be described as ‘a BBC poll’, but as ‘a poll for the BBC’. Relevant details, including the questions, results and underlying data, should where possible be made available (for instance via a link to the polling company website) so the audience has access to the methodology and full results.

Reporting Voting Intention Polls

- 11.4.36 The result, on its own, of a single voting intention poll (or any other method of assessing support for political parties or referendum questions) must not be the lead or be headlined in any output.

See guidance: Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

When reporting voting intention polls:

- in the UK they should, normally, have been conducted by a member of the British Polling Council
- the findings of voting intention polls must be reported in the context of trend, which may consist of the results of all major polls over a period or may be limited to changes in a single pollster's findings. Poll results which are out of step without convincing explanation should be treated with particular care.

- 11.4.37 Any proposal to report voting intention using research methods other than polling must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

The Political Research Unit is available for advice, including with regard to voting intention polls outside the UK.

Polling Day Polls

- 11.4.38 In the UK and many other countries, there are legal restrictions on the publication and reporting of opinion polls on polling day; advice is available from Chief Adviser Politics.

See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.24–10.4.25

Surveys (other than from polling companies), Questionnaires, Focus Groups and Votes

See 11.4.26–11.4.28

11.4.39 To be defined as a ‘BBC survey’ on any issue, a study must:

- have a defined and finite group whose opinions, policies, behaviours or experiences are being analysed
- have numerical parameters agreed in advance, such as an acceptable minimum response rate
- have an agreed methodology, including questions that are worded appropriately and posed consistently
- be reported in language that ensures nothing is claimed by the BBC which cannot be supported by the data
- be carried out by the BBC, not commissioned from a third-party organisation.

The result should normally be reported using actual numbers of respondents; percentages should be used only with care and appropriate context.

See 11.4.8 and 11.4.27

11.4.40 Focus groups, when properly selected, may be used to examine why certain views may be held but not the extent to which they are held.

The BBC must not imply that the views of focus groups, however carefully selected, represent the views of the population as a whole, or a particular section of the population; they must not be used as a means of trying to estimate party support or political opinion in the electorate at large.

11.4.41 ‘Straw polls’ are by definition an unrepresentative sample—they include phone, text and online (including social media) votes; they do not show the opinions or experiences of a wider group, nor do they have any value in measuring relative differences between a range of responses. They can, though, be an effective form of interaction with the audience, such as voting in competitions, illustrating a debate, or where they are being used for a non-serious purpose, such as in entertainment.

Where straw polls are used with regard to politics, current public policy or controversial issues, there should be an explicit reference making it clear to audiences that they are self-selecting and not representative or scientific. A large response does not make them any more representative.

Results can be given within the context of the content concerned in terms of actual numbers; percentages should be used with care. However:

- results of straw polls about politics, current public policy or controversial issues should not feature in news bulletins
- when straw polls are carried out on the same subject at different times, the results must not be presented in a way which may suggest a trend
- straw polls must never be used to gather serious information on party-political support or voting intentions.

See guidance: Audience Interactivity; and Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls

11.4.42 Any proposal to commission any sort of survey, questionnaire, vote or focus group on matters of current public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance.

11.4.43 Any proposal to carry out a phone, text or online (including social media) vote on any issue must be referred to the Interactivity Technical Advice and Contracts Unit (ITACU) and Editorial Policy. The appropriate approval process must be completed.

See Section 17 Competitions, Votes and Interactivity: 17.4.23–17.4.24

11.4.44 Other types of social research or studies (which may include legitimate academic work) may be self-selecting or otherwise not representative of any larger group. This type of research can be a useful way to find out about the experiences of individuals and, on occasion, to identify an actual number of people with a particular experience. However, it should not normally be used to gauge the opinions or experiences of the group as a whole, or to attribute proportionate value to different responses; it should never be used for those purposes with regard to politics, current public policy or other controversial issues.

- 11.4.45 When reporting surveys commissioned or carried out by other organisations they should be treated with appropriate scepticism, and, where appropriate, their methodology should be described. Care is required, particularly in news output, not to report such surveys in a way which leads the audience to believe they are more robust than is actually the case.

Vox Pops

- 11.4.46 The value of vox pops is to allow different sides of an issue to be expressed through the voices of the public. But the context should make it clear that they are illustrating an argument, not measuring opinion. Care should be taken, for instance, in choosing the location in which they are recorded and they should normally be edited in such a way as to ensure an appropriate range of views is reflected. They should not be used to imply false equivalence. Vox pops about politics, current public policy and controversial issues should normally be commissioned only with specific editorial purpose.

