

Trust in government information as low as ever it's ever been

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New MORI report highlights warning signs for parties and Tony Blair "and calls for an independent national statistics service to help restore confidence

A new report from MORI shows it is wrong to talk about a new crisis of trust in government "politicians are as distrusted as they always have been. However, 'Who do you believe? Trust in government information' does reveal a serious decline in certain aspects of trust.

Drawing on the findings from five discussion groups plus a review of decades of survey data, the MORI report shows that in this greater climate of distrust "driven by increased awareness of spin and the debates over the case for war with Iraq " public confidence in official statistics has diminished. The context for government information is also much more challenging than it used to be because of the huge growth in information available and an increasingly "bitter and dismissive" media.

The report also reveals the importance of independence when it comes to communicating official information. The distance this provides from government lends it credibility. One recommendation in the report is therefore an independent statistical service "echoing debates in Parliament over recent years.

The report goes beyond simply making the case for legislative reform and does not present independence as a magic solution for rebuilding trust in official information. It highlights that it is not the data itself that is the problem but rather the way it is used "the celebrity status of Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell have clearly had an influence here with the public suspicious that official information is always "spun".? As focus group participants put it:

"Everything "there's spin on it. Even when you don't think it has got spin, it's got spin on it."

"Stop spinning. The situation now is that they've been doing it so long that they're branded as untrustworthy and it's such a powerful branding that it'll take them ten years of being honest to sort it out "and they haven't got that long."

The case is therefore made for the establishment of an auditing body which vets how official statistics are used in the public domain. Comparisons are drawn with the success of the US 'FactCheck' organisation which ran throughout the last Presidential campaign.

Other recommendations include more innovative forms of communication by the government including using lesser known figures "rather than Ministers "to impart information. There are also calls for greater transparency. There is a real appetite from the general public in understanding how and why official figures have been collated and disseminated.

MORI Research Director Bobby Duffy said: "This report highlights how difficult it now is to get people to believe government information, partly because of actions by the government itself, but also partly because of a changing context. We therefore need a big gesture from the government to emphasise their commitment to rebuilding trust "giving independence to the statistics service and setting up a new body to audit the use of government information could help restore public confidence."

Technical note

MORI conducted five discussion groups with members of the general public. Groups were recruited according to demographic and psychographic profile. Each group lasted around two hours and typically contained around eight participants. Fieldwork was conducted during September 2004.