BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Joel Best, *Stat-spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 144 pp. $US 19.99 hardcover (978-0-520-25746-7)

This short, easy-to-read book aims to convey the message that one should not believe all numbers/statistics that one hears or sees. It provides pointers on how to identify questionable statistics. In the author's words, this book is designed to be practical, as a field guide in how to spot dubious data, which he calls "stat-spotting." Best targets figures that appear in news stories. The book is organized along different types of common problems which are explained and then illustrated through examples. Each chapter is organized around tools that are intended to help the reader think more skeptically about statistics they come across.

The first of these tools are statistical benchmarks. While the data he presents are American, the concept is useful. For example, if you know roughly the size of your country's population then you can use that as a benchmark against which to estimate whether a variety of figures that are thrown around in the media are at all reasonable. The rule of thumb that in general the worse things are, the less common they are warns the reader that extreme cases are often used to generalize to much larger figures. The remainder of the book is devoted to varieties of dubious data. "Blunders" are errors such as a misplaced decimal point that grossly changes the figure, misleading graphs, etc. "Sources," or who counted and why, includes a discussion of hyperbole (superlatives) and disturbing names (labelling). "Definitions" concerns what is included — domain expansion — and what is excluded from the definition. "Measurement" discusses examples of loaded questions, unusual inclusion criteria, etc. "Packaging" concerns formatting, misleading samples, convenient time frames, peculiar percentages, selective comparisons, etc. "Debates" examines when the "experts" disagree with one another.

The book closes with a convenient point-form summary of common signs of dubious data from each of the chapters. This is followed by a few pages of pointers for spotting statistics that are more credible. For example, figures that are accompanied by information about their methods, that are subjected to scrutiny by competing groups, and that use consistent measures from one study to the next all indicate believable figures. A brief afterword points out that if you see a figure that suggests

that things are really bad and you're shocked at how bad things are, they probably are not. Suggestions for further reading appear at the end.

Stat-spotting does what it sets out to do. It is an easy read conveying practical tips for assessing so many of the figures that we see in the media or hear in public speeches. It should be appropriate for the lay person and for undergraduates to start them thinking about what statistics mean and how to interpret them. The real life examples in the book are easy to understand, and in most instances are appropriate for the ideas they are meant to illustrate. It would not be appropriate for graduate students — one would hope that they know this already — although if there are fields in which there has been absolutely no exposure to statistics it might be appropriate. Although this is not, and is not intended to be an academic book, the author understands the use of numbers and their social construction or he would not have been able to convey the ideas and concepts that he does with such clarity.

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