

Journalists' Toolkit

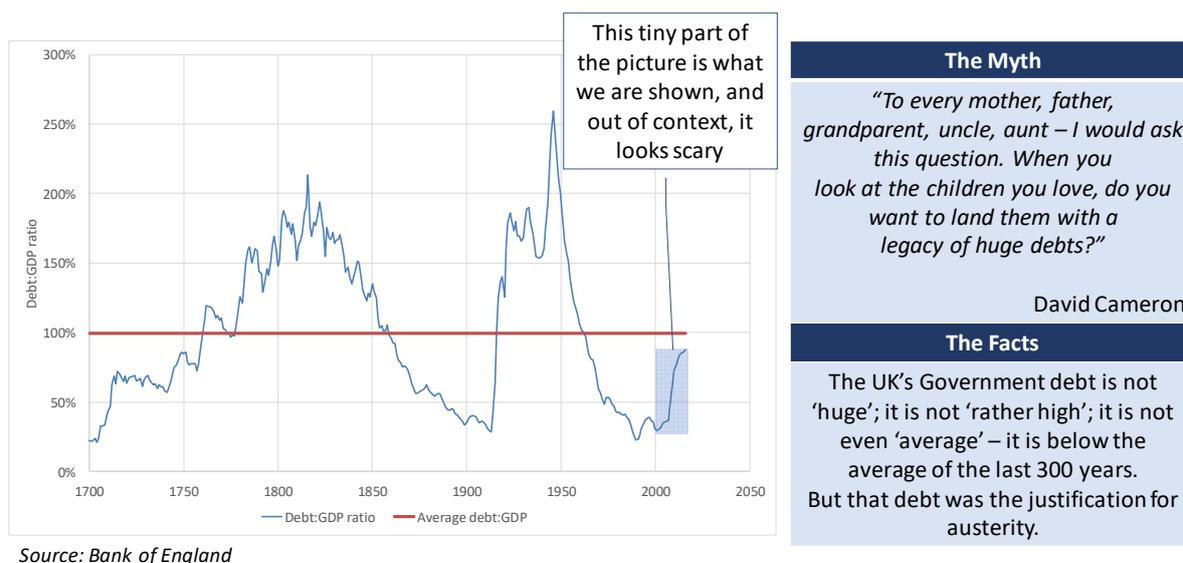
This note gives the second part of the toolkit for journalists who want to take a different perspective on economic news. It includes suggestions on:

- Myth-busting articles;
- Human interest articles;
- Debunking the latest speech.

Myth-busting articles

The Fact Pack on the website contains a large number of slides like this:

UK Government Debt is *not* at record levels



Many of these slides could form the basis for a myth-busting article.

Taking the example above, the quote from David Cameron¹ is one of many from government ministers justifying austerity because debt had supposedly reached levels which were supposedly unprecedented in peacetime. Because the data were presented selectively, they looked scary and most people –

¹ (Cameron, 2015)

often reluctantly – allowed themselves to be persuaded that austerity was a tough but necessary policy. It was not: it was a vulture policy.

As Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Poverty wrote²,

“The costs of austerity have fallen disproportionately upon the poor, women, racial and ethnic minorities, children, single parents and people with disabilities. The changes to taxes and benefits since 2010 have been highly regressive, and the policies have taken the highest toll on those least able to bear it.

The government says everyone’s hard work has paid off, but according to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, while the bottom 20 per cent of earners will have lost on average 10 per cent of their income by 2021/22 as a result of these changes, top earners have actually come out ahead.”

There are many such opportunities for myth-busting articles.

Human interest articles

These statistics are powerful, but many people do not relate to numbers alone. Behind the figures for poverty and homelessness are thousands of individual stories. Linking the concepts and data above to these stories will bring them to life and help many people to understand what is happening to them, and why.

Many of the charities active in poverty relief have access to countless such human stories. And these stories are a very important part of the picture – nurses having to visit food banks, parents having to choose between heating the house and feeding the children, *et cetera*.

But there is an even more widespread problem. Even those who are *not* at the bottom of the income ladder are struggling. Even those with careers which in previous generations would have been expected to lead to a very comfortable – if not prosperous – life now feel that such expectations are out of reach. In the last week, just in conversation, I have come across:

- a successful website designer who, at the age of 43, has found that house prices have always been 10% more than he could afford and who is now worrying about the prospects for his daughter. Aged 14, she is

2 (Alston, 2018)

doing extremely well in school and wants to go to university and get a job in London. He is concerned about whether he should burden her with all that debt in a world where a university degree may well not lead to a decently paying job;

- a recently-qualified accountant with one of the world's largest accountancy firms who is thinking of leaving the profession in order to direct pod-casts. When asked why he would abandon his career in this way, he replied, *"if I carry on, reasonably successfully, and get the promotions I expect, in three or four years' time, I will be earning £80,000 a year, and I will be able to borrow £300,000. But I still wouldn't be able to buy anything in London. I might as well have a life, even if I can't have a house."*

Mass impoverishment really does affect the vast bulk of people.

Debunking the latest speech

Inspired by the satirical work of Ambrose Bierce³, here is a guide to rhetorical phrases which can be used to disguise the speaker's intent. Of course, these words are still often used with their true meanings; but they are increasingly employed to gloss-over regressive policies and make them sound responsible and attractive. It is surprising how often using this guide as a phrasebook helps show what is really going on.

Phrase	Comment	Translation
Competitiveness	This is often used to refer to the unit costs of labour, which remain uncompetitive until those in the West are comparable with those in India and China	Mass impoverishment
Creative destruction	This powerful concept absolves us from any concern about negative effects of	Destruction

³ (Bierce, 1911)

	our decisions – they only <i>seem</i> to be destructive	
Expansionary fiscal consolidation	The belief that slashing public spending can only be a good thing and will cause rapid growth in the economy	Impeding economic growth
Hard-working families	This useful phrase lumps together those in well-paying jobs or with private incomes with normal people, struggling to get by.	The rich (and the rest)
Job creators	This phrase is used to refer to those possessed of great wealth, whether this wealth resulted from setting up and growing a business and thereby creating jobs, was inherited, or even resulted from mismanagement of a business which actually destroyed jobs	The very rich
Pro-business	This seldom means anything to do with what is good for the economy, or even what is good for businesses in general; it most often means listening to political donors who want less regulation of their businesses	Anti-regulation
Reform	Dismantling the welfare state	Taking from the most vulnerable
Responsibility	This often refers to reducing public spending, even – perhaps especially – when to do so would damage the economy	Irresponsibility
Scroungers, shirkers or takers	This refers to people of modest or no income who are in receipt of state-funded benefits or who are dissatisfied	Normal people

with their lot. They are contrasted with 'workers' and 'makers' and of course 'hard-working families'.

Tough decisions	Decisions which are tough for the majority of the population – though very seldom for the decision-maker	Bad decisions
There is no alternative	Popular among politicians who are pursuing an unpopular course on the grounds that to do anything else would not be responsible (see 'responsibility').	I don't want an alternative
Wealth creators	See 'job creators'	The rich

Armed with this phrasebook, we can see that when a politician says,

“Given the profligate way our predecessors ran the country and the enormous levels of debt we are consequently saddled with, it is vital that we manage responsibly to restore growth and stability to our economy. We will not shrink from tough decisions. We are resolutely pro-business, pro-family and pro-hard work. For too long hard-working families have been paying for scroungers and shirkers – from now on the rewards will go to the wealth creators”

even if they are well-intentioned and believe every word of what they say, the practical impact of their plans is much closer to the paragraph below,

“Given that there was a Global Financial Crisis caused by ineffective regulation of the banking and shadow banking sectors, we have decided to respond irresponsibly even though this will damage the growth and stability of our economy. We will not shrink from taking bad decisions, and our policies will be unpopular. We are resolutely anti-regulation and care passionately about our own families. For too long the rich (and the rest) have been paying taxes which benefit ordinary people – from now on the rewards will go to the rich.”

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