

Lies, damned lies ... and statistics

We are all aware that many organisations make use of statistics in a way which supports their case, often ignoring a more accurate picture provided by those same statistics.

The phrase "Lies, damned lies and statistics" is often attributed to Mark Twain in his *Chapters From My Autobiography* – but a look at Wikipedia will tell you that this cannot be trusted!

Trainee journalists are required to study Darrell Huff's book *How To Lie With Statistics* but it does not seem to have prevented many of them being duped.

Today's newspapers are full of stories misleading their readers with statistics.

In this and future articles, we aim to highlight some of the ways in which statistics are presented in a way to harm the case for rail or, indeed, boost the case for other modes of transport at the expense of railways.

Airline figures are always quoted based on distance travelled. For example, fatalities are given, per billion passenger kilometres.

However, as we are unlikely to pop out for an evening on the town in a jumbo jet, why are the figures not quoted as per passenger journey? This would certainly put railways in a more favourable light compared to airlines, and is the measure used by insurance companies covering travel.

Figures on the Wikipedia air safety page give the following

Why 'official' figures cannot be trusted

comparisons: Deaths per billion kilometres – air 0.05, rail 0.6, but deaths per billion journeys show air as 117 and rail as 20, quite a different picture.

Accident figures should be treated with some care. Airline figures do not include injuries or deaths at airports, while rail figures include passenger casualties at stations, such as people falling down a flight of stairs.

Then there are famous examples of "rail" accidents such as those terrible tragedies at Great Heck and Ufton Nervet.

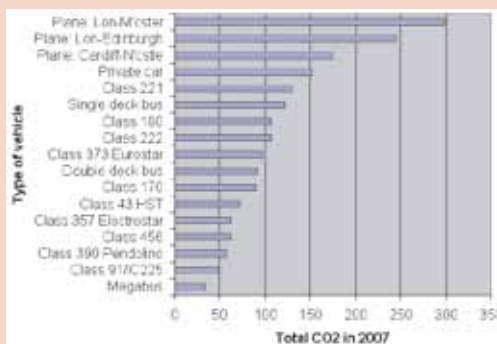
In both cases, the accident was caused entirely by a road vehicle. No crash would have occurred if the road vehicle had not interfered with the rail system's normal operation.

But the deaths and injuries sustained in these accidents are included in rail statistics. Should they not be included in road casualty figures instead?

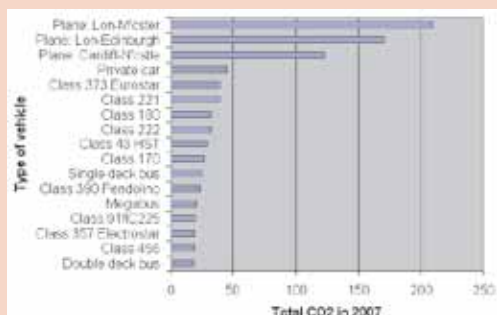
Road lobbyists may argue that railway accident figures do not include casualties such as trespassers – but then, as the railway industry has to pay for fences around their land, whereas road users do not, why should those engaged in illegal activities be counted alongside innocent victims?

CASE STUDY

The graph used in *Railwatch* 120 showed the comparison of carbon dioxide emissions between different modes of transport, with the 'megabus' apparently added to show road transport in a good light. But the Department for Transport used different average loadings for each mode. So what happens when you equalise the loadings? We have done this in our second graph, where 100% loadings are assumed. Not only does the megabus fare a lot worse than previously, the private car does a lot better and aircraft are shown to be even bigger polluters than was suggested in the DfT's published graph.



The original DfT graph, with varied loadings



The modified DfT graph, with 100% loadings

West Midlands

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Parry People Mover

Energy-saving People Mover

The branch AGM in April was addressed by John Parry MBE whose company developed the class 139 Parry People Mover, two of which now operate on the Stourbridge Town branch. John said that, with kinetic energy recovery, a class 139, pictured above, could carry 50 people up to six times as far as a Sprinter diesel unit and twice as far as a small diesel bus. Improving the quality of the track will allow vehicles with a lower axle-loading to be used, which would in turn result in less wear and tear and thus reduced maintenance costs – a virtuous circle.

Graphic illustration of rail benefits

The branch has designed a new regional version of the Railfuture membership leaflet which highlights local service improvements and station reopenings over the past 25 years in the West Midlands region. The leaflet is illustrated with photographs of local stations and typical traffic congestion on the M6.

Eco town needs rail link, not a guided busway

Although the Department of Communities and Local Government agreed that the proposed new eco town for 6,000 people at Middle Quinton would generate long-distance travel, the developers have offered only a guided busway to link the new town to Stratford-on-Avon. The branch has suggested that providing a through service to Birmingham, by reopening the line from Stratford to Honeybourne, would be a better solution.

Rail development plan for the region

The branch has been very busy this summer compiling a detailed response to the draft West Midlands Region Rail Development Plan which was published in June for a three-month consultation on behalf of the Regional Transport Partnership. In advance of formal consultation we organised a meeting for members of the many rail user groups in the region to hear about the plan first hand from one of its authors.

Making best use of existing rail network

Members of several local rail user groups have also attended two briefings organised by Passenger Focus on the West Coast and West Midlands rail utilisation studies. Those present were able to highlight a number of local service problems and list some future aspirations for consideration by Network Rail's RUS teams.

Project delayed 1

Work on a new under bridge at Sandfields on the mothballed freight branch to Anglesea Sidings was started in November 2008. When complete, this bridge will provide a vital link in the long-planned Lichfield southern bypass which has been funded by contributions from a nearby housing developer. Unfortunately the contractors (Wrekin) went into administration in March 2009, leaving the project half completed. A new contractor has now been appointed but the project completion date has slipped to November 2009.

Project delayed 2

To the casual observer, work on a new footbridge at Kidderminster station appeared to be complete in the summer of 2008. But then the "delays" started. The new facility, which provides a covered route between the two platforms with twin lift towers, was finally opened in May 2009. Yet more proof that everything on the railway takes longer than expected.

Upgrade for popular reopened line

The branch has welcomed the recent announcement by train operator London Midland of a £ 1.7million upgrade for eight stations on the Chase line. The cost is shared by Centro, London Midland and Network Rail. Additional funding from London Midland, Staffordshire County Council and the DfT's small schemes fund will be used to provide customer information systems at four of these stations. The Chase line was reopened in 1988 following a long campaign by local members and residents. Twenty years on, the service to Cannock and Rugeley now carries over 500,000 passengers per annum. We are optimistic that electrification will be recommended to follow the Bromsgrove project.