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November 2002

Regulars

## Opinion



### News that counts



It has become a commonplace that numbers are in general poorly dealt with by the mass media. But what to do about it? Most of those working in the media have backgrounds in the liberal arts, not the sciences, so the case for maths and numeracy is often worse than poorly put – it is not put at all. Of course, one of the aims of *Plus* is to provide an alternative view of mathematics as beautiful, interesting and useful, but we can't do it all by ourselves.

This is why Radio 4's new series of "More or Less" is doubly welcome. Not only will the programme help redress the anti-number balance in the media, but it will also confront the issues of innumeracy head-on, by examining numbers in the news, politics and everyday life.



Find out more about avalanches

If you enjoyed the interview with avalanche researcher Jim McElwaine in Issue 12 of *Plus*, you can hear more from him in the first programme, to be broadcast on Tuesday November 12th at 4pm. Later in the series, Dominic Smith, who in the same issue of *Plus* told us how depressing he found the poor image of mathematicians and scientists, will be giving the "More or Less" team an update on his search for social acceptability, and *Plus* Editor Helen Joyce will be giving her thoughts on the problem, and presenting the case for mathematics as beautiful.

As well as the six programmes to be broadcast this autumn, "More or Less" will be back for two more series next year, and it is to be hoped that it will become a permanent fixture on Radio 4.

## Standard calculations



[freeimages.co.uk](http://freeimages.co.uk)

An entertaining example of the way in which numbers are dealt with in the media – as an attractive accessory, not to be examined too closely – was provided this summer when a jobbing journo from the Financial times wanted a numerate quote for a piece he was writing on the difficulties of comparing interest rates for different credit cards. He contacted the Executive Editor of *Plus*, Robert Hunt, who is also Deputy Director of the Isaac Newton Research Institute in Cambridge. Robert is interested in and knowledgeable about financial mathematics, so he was happy to oblige by explaining how difficult it can be to calculate the APR (annual percentage rate) and untangle the misleading claims made in credit card ads.

To Robert's immense surprise, his comments were picked up by the mass media en masse – 20-plus newspapers, several TV and radio programmes, large numbers of websites – and suddenly he found himself cast as a top expert on credit cards. (His actual field of expertise? Fluid mechanics...) He was even asked for a report by a Treasury Select Committee!

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Robert quickly realised that, to the average person working in the media, anybody who can do a calculation involving compound interest is clearly a mathematical genius. The mere fact that he understood some simple arithmetic meant that he must be immensely knowledgeable about every aspect of financial matters. One woman from a BBC programme specifically about finance turned out not to realise that you get charged interest on interest...

The whole thing snowballed, and soon journalists stopped bothering to contact Robert before quoting him. This meant that the quotes became more and more selective over time. This process culminated in the desperately out of context quote chosen by Time magazine, who on July 1st 2002 informed the world

"Doing even a standard calculation took me forever."

**ROBERT HUNT**, *Cambridge University mathematician, on complicated credit card interest formulas*

Robert can't decide, does being quoted in Time magazine outweigh the meanness of the quote? More or less...!

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Have you anything to say that might be of interest to *Plus* readers? E-mail [plus@maths.cam.ac.uk](mailto:plus@maths.cam.ac.uk).

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