ECONOMICS BY NUMBERS

Berkeley economics professor Brad DeLong teams up with journalism professor Susan Rasky on a quick guide for journalists who talk to economists and want to be in the information – rather than disinformation – business.

Everybody's got an angle. The initials "PhD" don't guarantee impartiality. Ask your experts what their ideological opponents would say on the issue. Take what your experts say and advocate only as seriously as they can make a strong case for the other side – the side they oppose. Talking to "experts" who are interested not in educating but in confusing you is at best a waste of your time. Journalists are valuable and useful only to the extent that they are in the information rather than in the disinformation business.

Never write "economists disagree". No matter how limited your space or time, never write "economists disagree." Write WHY economists disagree. An expert who cannot explain why other experts think differently isn't much of an expert. A reporter who can't fit an explanation of where the disagreement lies into the assigned space isn't much of a journalist. A journalist who cannot figure out the source of the disagreement is a journalist who is working for whoever has the best-funded public relations firm – and is working for them for free.

No naked numbers. Don't report numbers by themselves. Numbers have meaning only in context. And context is almost always impossible without explicit comparisons to other numbers. How does this number compare to other cities, other states, other countries, other eras? How does this number compare to total spending, spending on necessities, spending on luxuries, spending on other kinds of goods?

No meaningless numbers. Do not report budget, trade, tax, or other numbers in billions or trillions or even millions. Use per capita or per worker or per household or per share terms to make them meaningful. It's not a $70-billion tax cut – it's $43 000 per recipient millionaire per year. It's not a $300-billion deficit – it's an extra $4 000 per family of four per year that the government has charged and is expecting you to pay through additional taxes sometime in the future.

No fake trends, three anecdotes do not a trend make. No matter what they told you on the features desk, three anecdotes do not a trend make. Make sure anecdotes that "fit just perfectly" are not grossly unrepresentative.

No invisible people. Don't tell half the story. Make sure you find all the players at the table, all the stakeholders in the outcome, all the participants in the market. Everywhere there are consumers and producers, bosses and workers, locals and foreigners. An immediate corollary: Make sure you find all the moving economic parts – demand and supply, wages and profits, costs and prices.

Follow the real-life incentives. Economists will tell you people respond to incentives. Journalists know that people are not quite so predictable – they respond to the incentives they see. The best stories are about unintended consequences. Always ask what incentives people see, how they react to them, and why they often don't see what economists think they should.

Consider other perspectives. People make bargains or choices or contracts because they think they are good deals. Whenever people make what look to you like bad choices, ask what they see that you do not (and what you see that they do not).

Consider the alternatives. People make lousy bargains or choices or contracts because they think their other options are even worse. Remember, always, to ask "compared to what?"

It's all just transactions. Your calling as a journalist is to give the public the tools to evaluate government policies and actions. Government is not a glamorous gathering of celebrities. Government is not a sports cage match. Journalism is not a gossip circle. Report on government as you would report to your siblings on the rental agent your mother hired to handle her holiday home.

Know your sources. Don't ask international economists about the minimum wage; don't ask labour economists about global reserve demand.

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plans to use some of the $700bn bail-out money to buy up banks' bad debts and decided instead to concentrate on improving the flow of credit for the US consumer.

20 November
The International Monetary Fund (IMF) approves a $2.1bn (£1.4bn) loan for Iceland , after the country's banking system collapsed in October. It is the first IMF loan for a Western European nation since 1976.

23 November
The US government announces a

$20bn (£13.4bn) rescue plan for troubled banking giant Citigroup after its shares plunge by more than 60% in a week.

25 November
The US Federal Reserve announces it will inject another $800bn into the economy in a further effort to stabilise the financial system and encourage lending. About $600bn will be used to buy up mortgage-backed securities while $200bn is being targeted at unfreezing the consumer credit market.

26 November
The European Commission unveils an economic recovery plan worth €200bn which it hopes will save millions of European jobs. The scheme aims to stimulate spending and boost consumer confidence.

December 2008

1 December
The US recession is officially declared by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a leading panel including economists from Stanford, Harvard and MIT. The committee concludes that the US economy started to contract in December 2007.

4 December
French President Nicolas Sarkozy unveils a €26bn stimulus plan to help France fend off financial crisis, with money to be spent on public sector investments and loans for the country's troubled carmakers.

11 December

Bank of America announces up to 35,000 job losses over three years following its takeover of Merrill Lynch. It says the cuts will be spread across both businesses. The European Central Bank, as well as central banks in the UK, Sweden and