

Tuesday 13 August 2013

'I try to resist the temptation to make something out of nothing'

Nate Silver discusses data at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

In the immediate aftermath of his prediction that the Yes campaign has 'virtually no chance' of winning the Scottish Independence vote next year, Nate Silver appeared at the Edinburgh International Book Festival this morning to talk data analysis and how 'you don't want to get involved, if you're a scientist, in the street fight' of American partisan politics.

Aged only 35, with his blog FiveThirtyEight.com syndicated to the news and sports network ESPN and his almost six-hundred-thousand Twitter followers, Silver's stock continues to rise and rise, but he is still probably best known for his political predictions. Silver stunned Right-wing commentators and left many on the Left scrambling around for mitigating adjectives in 2008 when he gave Barack Obama a 91% chance of Presidential victory. 'What people think' as he said at his event, 'is when you say 90% you really mean 100%. But what you actually mean is 90%'.

This kind of matter-of-fact statement about his work is indicative of Nate's whole philosophy. Whether or not he's personally apolitical is irrelevant: his politics and his data interpretation don't mix. He comes across as almost phobic of rhetoric: stressing caution, margin of error and disdaining the bombast of American pundits and politicians. A media outlet quoting from both sides of an argument, for Nate, does not necessarily equate to objectivity. Indeed, he observed that this act is often nothing more than 'a way of covering your ass and making sure you don't get into trouble.'

It's no wonder he goes down well in Scotland - his comment that he likes Britain because its electorate tends to be 'rational and sane' got a rousing laugh from the crowd, and it is worth noting that the voices from the Yes campaign that have contradicted him in the wake of his prediction have been, on the whole, remarkably vitriol-free.

Silver also spoke about his vision for the future of his blog FiveThirtyEight.com. He clearly holds his readership in high esteem, stating that the people who visit FiveThirtyEight for news 'want the score, they

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want to know the bottom line...they don't care about the gossip'. He articulated the role he sees data journalism playing in the future: 'It's our job to say 'here's all the information, now what does it mean?'. Silver even went as far as to say 'we can ignore topics that don't play to our strengths...it's picking your battles within your fields'. Silver is obviously a man worth consulting on most things political and financial these days, but he was keen to stress that it is the data that tells the story: he is just the interpreter: 'Being seen as a magic svengali', he said, 'is the opposite of my attitude.'

Silver sees his site evolving over the next few years to become the go-to place for data-driven journalism, and talked about looking for young, exciting people to join his team. Needless to say, after his Book Festival event, there will be a fair few Scottish speculative CV's in his inbox by now...

The Edinburgh International Book Festival continues until Monday 26 August. Full details of the programme and tickets can be found at www.edbookfest.co.uk

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