BuzzWord

one stop english

anecdata

> anecdata | NOUN [UNCOUNTABLE]: information which is presented as if it is based on serious research but is in fact based on what someone thinks is true

'Anecdata always has the potential to mislead. Consumers with individual or small-group policies that have been cancelled are a tiny proportion of the insured, and are also a small proportion of those most affected by health reform.'

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The word information is a very open-ended, 'one-size-fits-all' term. On the one hand, it may refer to hard facts, knowledge based on actual evidence or research. On the other hand, and more often than not, 'information' may be the product of far less reliable sources – personal experience, hearsay, speculation or even individual opinion. A novel way of referring to the latter kind of information is the term anecdata, a coinage which sprung up some time ago but has begun to enjoy a little more exposure over the last couple of years.

It's probably fair to say that most of us either read or hear some kind of anecdata daily. It's not easy to imagine how the wheels of the media – broadcast or published – would keep turning without a generous helping of anecdata to keep the stories flowing. Though a proportion of the information we hear or read about will be based on facts and truths, it's unrealistic to expect everything reported to be grounded in solid and indisputable evidence. So other stimuli, like individual experiences or perceptions, inevitably inform what's presented. The slippery thing about anecdata, however, is that it takes on the guise of substantiated fact, ostensibly to prove a point or make a prediction about something. In reality, it is pretty tenuous and based on casual evidence or experience. The term anecdata is therefore often used with humorous or even pejorative overtones – a way of signalling that such information should be viewed cautiously because it may be less reliable than it appears.

Background – anecdata

The term anecdata first began to appear in the early nineties and is a blend of the noun data and the adjective anecdotal, meaning 'based on personal experience rather than on facts that can be checked.' The adjective anecdotal dates back to the late 18th century, derived from the earlier noun anecdote (a short story told by someone about an actual incident). The word data is classed as a mass noun in contemporary usage, but historically was the plural form of the singular noun datum meaning 'piece of information'. Mirroring this, there's also some evidence for the use of a singular form anecdatum, which identifies a single piece of information of this (anecdotal) type.

Another expression featuring the word data, which has emerged in recent years, is big data. This refers to a body of data, often generated by online activity, which is so large and complex that it becomes very difficult to manage with conventional database and data processing tools. So new procedures must be developed to deal with it. The race to create effective solutions for big data is currently a hot topic in the world of technology.