SP4a: What we need to decide on 2nd October – Humphrey Southall

1.   How are we going to take decisions today?

Academics are a bit prone to see meetings as consisting of presentations followed by discussion, and such meetings are great for disseminating ideas – but advancing a joint project also involves taking collective decisions, and such meetings don't do that. What follows tries to identify some of the decisions we need to take, but maybe our first discussion should be deciding how we can best take decisions.

2.   Are we writing a book, or what?

I will leave it to others to make the case for "what", as I am still unclear what they have in mind. The advantages of doing "a book" are:

- **Provided we can find a publisher**, we can concentrate on actually creating the content, which is what we know about, and leave production, dissemination and long-term preservation to others – the publishers, bookshops and libraries. If we do go for online multimedia, we need to think very hard about sustainability, and simply reaching an audience. (NB (a) many academic web sites have absurdly low usage, and (b) I have led a couple of projects to build large web sites, and they require a range of disciplines which are scarce in Radstats, and expensive to hire in – those projects had six-figure budgets).
- These days, "books" pretty much automatically include e-book versions.
- Those of us in academic jobs can justify spending time on this project as part of our jobs, rather than as a spare time activity, only if it creates a fairly clearly identifiable publication. This is arguably particularly true of *young* academics – and if we want to produce an up to date book on current issues we need more young authors.
- Quite simply, we collectively understand what a book is, so it is an easily explained goal.
- If our aim is to collectively produce a book, the next stage – even before lining up authors – is to write a book outline of 4-6 pages, and to discuss it at least informally with publishers. I get approached fairly frequently about writing chapters for edited collections, but don't take such approaches very seriously unless a publisher is involved. In most cases, you can make an initial contact with a series editor who is an academic, who then advises on the more formal approach to the publisher.

The remainder of this paper tends to assume we are producing a book, although there are analogous issues if we are doing something online.

3.   What (book?) are we writing?

Because we have been discussing this by e-mail, discussion has inevitably been a bit unfocussed and at one stage or another three rather distinct ideas have been circulated. I think they are all interesting and potentially commercially viable – but they need to be kept distinct and we can arguably only do one of them:

- *A how-to book for community groups wanting to do their own social surveys*. Tackled as a kind of "guide to community surveys" it could work very well, but I suspect it needs a couple of experienced authors to be really committed, while a large

collection of "case studies" by diverse authors would not provide the practical detail needed by the target audience. It might well work better as an online resource.

- *A book exploring the relationship between "big data" and traditional statistical methods and sources*. This is an important and timely topic, and one which my current funding from the AHRC "Big Data" programme gives me some involvement with: personally, I feel much current work on big data is ripe for a debunking, partly because it provides politicians and others with an excuse for not gathering good quality data: all you need is "found data", albeit lots of it, and computing power – plus some "data scientists", whatever they are. However, I am not convinced there is enough relevant expertise in Radstats to write such a book.[1]

- *A successor to our 1998 book,* **Statistics in Society***.* This is my preferred option, and it is hard to overstate what a great project it was for Radstats: it was about "using statistics to support progressive social change", so very directly advanced our goals; with 47 short chapters and 54 contributing authors, it was a joint project linking many of us, and got other younger researchers involved; it publicized the group; and it set us up financially, all royalties going to Radstats. However, it is now nearly twenty years' old, and clearly needs updating. Of course, the title may well be part of what needs updating and it may be timely to mention big data.

4.   Structure/Size

We don't need to identify all the chapters and their authors, but we do need to give an indication of how long the book will be, and how many chapters: a typical academic book is 80-100,000 words long, but *Statistics in Society* is approaching 200,000 words (my own chapter is 3,725 words). Keeping chapters to 3-4,000 words each makes them much easier to write, but of course means more work for the editors, both in finding enough authors and then coordinating all the material.

Although a book proposal does not need to list all the chapters, it should probably identify the book's sections. *Statistics in Society* has these:

- *Collecting statistics*.
- *Models and theory*.
- *Classifying people*.
- *Counting poverty*.
- *Valuing health*.
- *Assessing education*.
- *Measuring employment*.
- *Economics and politics*.

---

[1] It also needs to be emphasised that <u>most</u> "big data" is non-quantitative. The following was the full list of examples of Big Data in the AHRC's Big Data programme call: "Time-based media, including film, TV, CCTV footage etc; Retail data; Geospatial data; Email and social media, including aggregators; Images and associated metadata; Performance data, including raw data of recordings, choreography, performance structure; Open government data; Music; Large-scale digital scans of library and archive holdings such as newspapers and books; Museum and Gallery archive and catalogue data".

NB even if we opt to re-work *Statistics in Society*, the chapters and sections need re-thinking.

5. Market

Bluntly, we need to convince a publisher that our book will probably make a profit for them, and the main way they expect you to do this is to identify existing books that are somewhat similar, and then explain how our book will be different enough that people will also want to buy it. NB saying that our book is unique and nothing like it has ever been published says, mainly, there is no market at all for such books.

Obviously, books with "big data" in the title are currently fashionable, although I wonder whether this will still be true in three year's time. Books one could mention include *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work and Think* (John Murray, 2013), *Big Data Demystified: How Big Data Is Changing The Way We Live, Love And Learn* (The Big Data Group, 2013), *Big Data: Using Smart Big Data, Analytics and Metrics to Make Better Decisions and Improve Performance* (Wiley, 2015), or just *Statistics for Big Data For Dummies* (Wiley, 2015) – actually, part of me would really like to do *Big Data: An oversold vacuous concept …*.

However, I suspect a new version of *Statistics in Society* would be much easier to sell, *provided* we can obtain actual sales figures (which we are certainly entitled to, given we get the royalties). Part of the reason for its success was it was just about ideal as supplementary reading on lots of courses, not just in statistics but in social policy, CQSW, etc.

6. How do we organise?

Our meeting today is intended to create some kind of coordination group for the project, but there are several ways this could work:

- *We form the actual writing team.* I suspect the "how-to" book would be best created by a small writing team of 3-4 people.
- *We are the editors.* Being in the very final stages of editing a multi-authored book, as part of an editorial team of three, I would suggest that four is the absolute maximum and three preferable: you need talk regularly, and everyone needs to be part of all discussions or else you keep revisiting decisions. NB *Statistics in Society* had just two editors.
- *Some of us are editors, and others form an "editorial board", formal or informal*. My current book has only 15 chapters, but something on the scale of *Statistics in Society* arguably needs a pair or trio of editors handling all communication with the publishers and most communication with authors, plus additional people (a) suggesting and recruiting authors and (b) reading and commenting on draft chapters.
- *Some of us are overall editors and others are section editors*. I don't think this was how *Statistics in Society* was actually done, but one model would be to have a separate editor for each of the sections, such as those listed in (4). NB much of the work of editing a book is progress tracking and chasing, and I can see big problems with two-level progress chasing.

Humphrey Southall