

## LETTERS

Below is the letter which I sent to the editor of R.S.S. News and Notes in some haste to get it into the March issue. If anyone else feels that other points should be made I think it would be very useful for them to write in their own right to the editor. One person can't hope to represent the opinions of the whole group and in any case the more we can encourage debate on these issues the better. I think it was a pity that some of the positive reactions to our original letter in the January issue of N & N did not get sent to the editor but sent to me instead. As a result the Society will be unaware of the sympathy this letter aroused in the many people who have joined the group. To encourage exchange of ideas I thought it would be valuable to print the letters I've received which contained detailed comments and suggestions for the group's activities.

Liz.

### REPLY TO P.R. SHELTON'S LETTER IN R.S.S. NEWS AND NOTES

In his letter in the February issue of News and Notes Mr. Shelton suggests that an honest statistician "must be objective in all he does". The basic contention of 'Radical Statistics' members is that objectivity, in the sense of value-free research, is impossible in applied statistical work. Apparent objectivity is merely the obscuring of these values in research reporting. One of the aims of radical statisticians is to expose the implicit value-judgements in research, and we regard this as "doing our job honestly".

It is our view that much applied statistical work is explicitly political in nature, being concerned with policy decisions. All such questions involve a conflict of interests, and it is often the effect, if not the intention, of statistical research that the public is persuaded that purely technical solutions to these problems can be found. We suggest that the result of "bringing one's political beliefs into one's work" in this context will possibly result in a greater awareness among ordinary people of the decisions being taken from them by the so-called experts.

Yours sincerely,

Liz. Atkins

### LETTERS RECEIVED

Dear Liz,

I was very interested in your letter in R.S.S. News and Notes, January 1975. My own background is largely in mathematical statistics, but I have been making determined efforts in the last few years to 'become' an applied statistician, particularly social statistics. I am presently engaged in research related to poverty, and consequently I am being forced to tie down my political stance on social and economic issues, a thing I have managed to avoid doing for some time past, though having the best of intentions.

I have also had some good intentions concerning the issues you have raised in your letter. I would welcome the opportunity of being able to implement these latter good intentions, though my ideas on these issues are fairly vague at the moment.

One thought that has occurred to me is that there is a need for enforceable standards of practice for professional statisticians, as there are for other professions, law, medicine etc. A great many decisions with grave social and economic consequences are made on the basis of statistics, too often misused, either through ignorance or deliberately.

Of course, the idea of enforceable standards of practice is full of dangers. Their operation may be taken over by the present statistical 'establishment', in which case they are unlikely to be of much use, or, even if they are developed and operated initially along radical lines, they may become part of the establishment as have the other professional bodies, e.g. B.M.A., Bar Associations, etc.

Michael Stuart

Dear Liz,

I think there are important difficulties in any socialist/humanist critique of current statistical practice and myth, not least being a shared point of view from which to analyse; and yet the very existence of a group which considers this worthwhile is already a big event.

I feel the core of the project lies in an examination and development of (b) and (c). I think the cult of expertise can be undermined on two levels

I. By democratising the power structure that supports it, a structure that is invariably hierarchical, specialised, geared towards technical solutions rather than social change.

II. By exposing the false basis of elitism in the statistical community itself; an elitism that arises from elevating aspirations towards objectivity, rationality etc into assertions of their achievement and a self-righteous intolerance of opposing points of view. This has the effect of inhibiting an awareness both of the subjectivity of the analysis and also of whose point of view is being passed off as rational and objective.

Fintan Hurley.

Dear Liz,

I was very interested in your letter in R.S.S. News & Notes. My own background is largely in mathematical statistics, but I have been making determined efforts in the last few years to 'become' an applied statistician. I am presently engaged in research related to poverty, and consequently I am being forced to tie down my political stance on social and economic issues, a thing I have managed to avoid doing for some time past, though having the best intentions.

One thought that has occurred to me is that there is a need for enforceable standards of practice for professional statisticians, as there are for law, medicine etc. A great many decisions with grave social and economic consequences are made on the basis of statistics, too often misused, either through ignorance or deliberately. Of course the idea of enforceable standards of practice is full of dangers. Their operation may be taken over by the present statistical establishment, in which case they are unlikely to be of much use, or even if they are developed and operated initially along radical lines, they may become part of the establishment as have other professional bodies.

Michael Stuart

Dear Liz,

Thank you for your circular letter of Jan 14th. From the large number of items you list as a possible agenda I estimate that discussion time will be very limited, I therefore take the liberty of sending you my comments below.

#### Group Action

Attendance at R.S.S. meetings very useful. I was recently thrown out of the R.S.S. for course comments, but I think this kind of activity essential as the R.S.S. is the main forum for interfacing statisticians with the world. This is where a radical approach is much needed.

Attendance at public meetings may cause more harm than good, because the poor image of the statistician is nonsensically archaic. Letters to the press are an excellent idea, and this must include local even more than national press.

Original papers are highly desirable but very difficult to produce and have accepted. Reworking existing analyses is more valuable in fact, but it has negligible impact on the larger public. However this is a very important contribution to the cleaning of the statistical image after its soiling over the last 20 years by practitioners of O.R., market research etc using statistics as if it were a 'waranty of purity'.

Boycotts of certain sponsors is probably more important than certain fields or types of research. It is a problem to keep up to date in this respect as the obnoxious types change quickly in our political flux.

#### Relationship with R.S.S. and Institute of Statisticians

I believe this should be the major internal facet of the proposed Group. Training and professionalism are exclusively the concern of IoS, on which basis I remember it was founded. After some years now it has not grown into a large institute, nor have its qualifications found especial merit. I do not know the workings of the IoS, nor where the power lies in it, but it seems obvious to me that it is not a major policy influencing organisation in the outer world. Some senior R.S.S. people would like to see closer liaison with the IoS generally I think this is a line this group should press hard.

The R.S.S. is the best of professional societies I have met, and is conducted in a Victorian-gentlemanly manner which I confess to liking. This is partly because it does not consider professionalism and is run by those who are not trying to use it for their personal advancement. The obverse to this is that the R.S.S. is out of the pressures of the day. Radicalism to improve the control of the R.S.S. and make it more open is very desirable I believe. The obvious approach to attacking the deep-rooted establishment of the R.S.S. would possibly be through a reform sub-committee of some of its sections.

"Radical" to me seems to be relevant in different directions, academic, professional and political.

Academic statistics is rather retarded and defensively reactionary against the computer. Up to now the basis has been wholly algebraic and the limitations of algebra have been a barrier to solving obvious statistical problems, in distribution and estimation theory particularly. ... A radical rethink is long overdue here. Professional relationships and qualifications have changed quickly over the last years. The radical approach is needed here to introduce criteria other than the blanketting Oxbridge ones. Political problems are to me the interface between the statistician and non-statistician in all matters, not just those of party politics. The present time is a good one to spread the thought that politics might have a small element of numeracy in it, since the same thought is spreading into many other disciplines which have lacked it in the past.

Peter Herne.

Dear Liz,

I was pleasantly surprised to read about Radical Statistics group. Things I'm interested in- Demystifying statistics and numeracy generally. Ethics of clinical trials of drugs and treatments, both in drug firms and the NHS (this was in my Master's dissertation) The statistical function in the administration and, in particular, production of a genuine democratic socialist society. Development of statistics to show the real waste and irrationality of capitalism (i.e. development of critical measures of social processes) Production of counter-career information about statistics for students and school-kids.

These professional radical groupings seem more advanced in the States than here. Do you know radical groups in North America or elsewhere? International bulletin of alternative statistics??

Power structures and statistics. Very important- 'lies, damn lies and stats' mythology is popular and assigns the blame for distortion and deception on statisticians, while in fact most statisticians try to protect their data from the use made of it by politicians, administrators etc. A useful diversion of resentment away from the real power structure.

Statistics in the socialist world. I wish there was one! No hard data at all - much worse than here.

We should start thinking about what we can do in the professional and trade-union organisations we are in.

We'll have to work out how we can prevent our political differences from making the group ineffective or splitting up. Best a very loose umbrella set-up.

DO WRITE AND LET ME HAVE YOUR REACTIONS TO THESE LETTERS AND TO THE NEWSLETTER IN GENERAL. WE HOPE THIS WILL PROVIDE A FORUM FOR WORKING OUT OUR VIEWS ON WHAT THE GROUP SHOULD BE AND DO.