

The Case for the Abolition of the Government Statistical Service

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The typical statistical survey involves centralising a mass of information into a single data set. In the days when data sets comprised a mass of forms and punched cards, restriction on access to the statistics was inevitable because duplication of the data set would have been costly. Central control was necessary in order to make checks on accuracy and to enable unanticipated enquiries of the dataset to be answered.

Nowadays the data set is expressed and stored in electronic form. The technology makes it easier to exercise central control. Computer programs can facilitate checks on accuracy and can usually deal with unanticipated queries. The technology can also be used to duplicate and communicate. The dataset can be made available to anyone, anywhere, who has suitable computing and communications equipment. Anyone with suitable programs can make their own extractions and analysis of the data.

After compilation there is little necessity for central control. Centralisation in terms of the collection of statistical information can be part of a system which is quite decentralised in terms of the distribution of the results. These developments put new questions on the statistical agenda. Does Britain, for example, still need a centralised statistical service under the direct control of the cabinet?

Integrity and Politicization

The original justification for centralisation was to ensure the integrity of government statistics. Winston Churchill established the Central Statistical Office in 1941 in order that the figures collected "will be accepted and used without question (by the war cabinet)". The Rayner Review of government statistical services pointed out, with some justification in 1980, that "Ministers in the UK are rarely accused of cooking the books" (Rayner 1980, p 5) and suggested that this integrity is important to the credibility of government. The Review recommended that the Central Statistical Office should remain as part of the Cabinet Office and that the head of the Government Statistical Service (who is also the Director of the CSO) should have a right of appeal on questions involving statistical integrity direct to the Prime Minister (Rayner, 1980, p 22).

The widening of the political debate in the 1980s enlarged the concept of statistical integrity. Politicians usually bandy statistics about - particularly when comparing the performance of different governments. But in the 1980s the political football included the value of statistical information, not just the interpretation of historical series. The validity of statistics on unemployment, poverty, and even local government finance became matters of political debate.

Churchill, in setting up the CSO in 1941, assumed political consensus (for the development of the war effort) and did not want the Cabinet arguing about statistics. But without consensus political discussion of statistics is unavoidable. The politicization of statistics to the degree of questioning their value negates the idea that direct links with the executive arm of government necessarily contributes to statistical integrity.

The idea postulated in 1980 that the integrity of statistics might be preserved by meeting between Prime Minister and the Head of the GSS now seems rather fanciful. Ten years later reports of any such meetings would be more likely to be interpreted as an attempt by the Government to influence the nature of the statistics being produced or published.

The politicisation of statistics suggests that statistics should not be the subject of exclusive central government control - nor the subject of any direct kind of political control. It is within the domain of politics to question the validity of statistics. But where this questioning leads to the suppression of statistical information (eg on poverty - see CPAG 1988) or to 'adjustments' which make well established time series unreliable (eg unemployment - see Taylor 1990),

politics is in danger of interfering with administration, and with the legitimate and proper activities of local government, and those of commercial and voluntary organizations.

Getting cooperation of respondents

A factor which is commonly assumed to support the need for the Governmental Statistical Service is the power Government has to ensure that information needed for the compilation of statistics is provided by organizations such as firms (for industrial statistics) and by individuals (eg for the Census). But this power belongs to government (with a small 'g') in the form of legislation - not upon executive action by the Government of the day. The statutes which require the production of information do not have to specify that the information has to be delivered to the Central Statistical Office or to any other department of central government.

For statistics related to population, for example, the usual pattern is that the information is delivered to an agent of the government - not to a civil servant. The Community Registration Officers who collect information on the Poll Tax, and the Registrars who collect information on births, marriages, and deaths, are employees of local government not central government. It is not clear that the response rate on surveys conducted in other areas such as production, finance, labour, etc depends upon the inclusion of the Royal Crown in the letterhead of the covering letter.

The dependence of statistics on 'form-fillers' itself provides an important argument for decoupling statistical services from central government. Central government is the provider of statistics, as asserted by the Rayner Review, only in a narrow sense. The true providers of statistics are the form-fillers giving information about themselves, about their households, or about the activities of the organization they are working for. The question which needs to be asked is 'Who owns the information they provide?'

Government Property or Private Property

Information from surveys such as the Census of Population is currently labelled as Crown Copyright. But should not such information should be in the public domain, on the grounds that it is representatives of the public who provided the information in the first place?

Instead of a single Governmental Statistical Service, there could be a multiplicity of public statistical services. The organizations providing these services would be public in the sense that they would be accountable to the particular public served. But they would be no more accountable to central government than, say, the National Trust.

Some precedents for such developments already exist. Some trade associations, for example, collect statistics from their members and make the aggregate results available to the contributing members. The mass media industries, television, newspapers and magazines, are prodigious collectors of statistics on their audiences. But no governmental body is involved - the collection and dissemination of the results is wholly under the control of bodies within the industry.

The development of public statistical services might mean relatively slight changes in statistical organization. The CSO and the the Government Social Survey, for example, might work much in the way they work currently. In both cases their major customer and source of finance would be central government. But some areas might follow the example of the mass media and set up their own statistical systems. A service for local population statistics, including the Censuses of Population, might be managed primarily by a body working to representatives of local rather than of central government.

The major change would be in the area of ownership of statistical information. It is suggested that a principle of community or public ownership should be established. This principle would recognise that information collected from a particular sector of the community, albeit on a sample basis, belongs to the members of that community. Government would play a role in that it could enforce existing legislation which ensured that the information central government itself needed was collected, it could play a part in setting up the governing bodies of the public statistical service providers, and it could monitor and enforce the implementation of the principle that statistical information belongs to the community from which it is gathered.

Dangers of Commoditization

The same developments which allow for the wide and rapid dissemination of statistical information also allow for the 'commoditization' of information. Whereas in general information technology developments make access to information easier and more productive for those with the necessary equipment, these developments also make it less practical and or relatively costly to disseminate information widely and cheaply in printed form.

The multiplicity of census volumes on the shelves of major public libraries, for example, was a phenomenon of the 1980s, 1970s and earlier which is unlikely to be characteristic of the 1990s. It will make sense from many points of view for the information presented in these volumes to be made available in some form of digital storage which allows for automated analysis for the creation on non-standard as well as standard tables. But one potential disadvantage is that it will enable charges to be levied on the user.

Instead of free access being the norm, it is likely that there will be pressure on the public statistic service providers and public libraries who support the service provided to charge users for the information they want. The level of charges may be trivial in relation to the budgets of commercial organizations. But they could make access difficult for students, members of voluntary associations, and individual citizens. The principle of free access to public libraries is likely to be under attack.

The Societal Role of Statistics

It is important therefore to assert the public interest and ownership of statistical information. Statistics are not just a tool of the central government of the day. Statistical information has many wider functions in contributing to the coordination of the activities of local government and commercial organizations. There should be recognition of the societal role of statistics - in providing what should be an agreed framework for political debate encompassing both the validity of the statistics and the indications they give of the health of the economy and of society.

The recognition that statistics should be public rather than governmental property should be the main argument to sustain the quality, integrity, and availability of statistics.

References

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