

## **“Big Data Ideas – Political Perspectives and Radical Statistics**

**A ‘scoping’ paper for the meeting in London on 2 October 2015**

Draft Ver1: 2015july30 JB

The aim of this paper is to provoke controversy and discussion about what the project should be and how it should develop. I have put it in the form of ‘FAQs’ because (a) I like writing that way, and (b) I think it is a good way of identifying and crystallising the issues.

1. **What is “the project”?** The project arose out of a sense that (a) it is time for RadStats to do something like publishing a book, and (b) the statistical world has changed massively since *Demystifying Social Statistics* (Irving/Miles/Evans) and *Statistics in Society* (Dorling/ Simpson).
2. **What are these meetings about?** Early discussions (Bibby/Evans) led to the decision that there should be a project meeting in York on 26 Feb 2016, the day before the RadStats Annual Conference. Further discussions in London led to the proposal that there should also be a meeting in London in September/October 2015. These meetings are to get the project off the ground and to monitor and assist its progress.
3. **Should we not be more precise about the aims of the meetings?** Well yes, certainly! I (JB) see the September meeting as essentially a ‘scoping’ meeting to identify important questions such as:
  - What, more precisely is the aim of the project?
  - Who is going to be involved?
  - What’s the best way forward?

By the time we get to the February meeting I hope we will have a draft structure for the book (if that is what we decide to go for), and hopefully a few draft chapters. The following sections give one (JB’s) stab at what to do and how to do it.

### **What, more precisely is the aim of the project?**

First, I think we should think more broadly than just “a book”. In today’s age of e-this and open-that, we should certainly think in terms of e-books, downloadable pdfs of individual chapters, web-pages, discussion forums and whatever else is available and useful, or will be in 5-10 years. We need to THINK BIG, and think long-term! One proposal is that we should get somebody to do a scoping paper on precisely this area – what formats are available for us, and what should we use? There is of course an interplay between format and content, and the latter should drive the former. However, if we can get some imaginative ideas in terms of technology and/or format, I think this will open up our ideas especially to the younger generation, and it may also generate some ideas for us.

I see the aim of the project as to **explore the permanent political issues of power etc. in society, inasmuch as they may relate to data issues today and tomorrow** (with a bit of yesterday – but not too much!)

This leads to two questions: What are the “political issues of power etc.” that we wish to explore?, and What “data issues” are to be included? Following C. Wright Mills, I would call the former “themes”, while the latter are “topics”. Thus we may view our area of investigation as a matrix of cells – the column-headings are “Themes” (political issues), and the row-headings are “Topics” (areas of application). Here in no particular order are some Themes and some Topics:

- **Themes:** Power, Privacy, Ownership, Access, Control, Who Pays? etc etc
- **Topics:** Health, Education, Government Statistics, World Development, Environment etc.

Much of what we have to say, I suggest, can be linked to one or more Themes and to one or more Topics. I propose that we should discuss whether this way of looking at things is fruitful, what its limitations are, and if generally agreed, what other items should appear in the above lists.

**Who is going to be involved?** I personally am happy to involve anybody who is interested and prepared to develop the project. I do not want to limit it to members of RadStats, or even to left-wingers. If anybody wishes to argue for a free-market approach to data, I am happy to have them in the debate!

**What is the best way forward?** I hope that we will have several scoping papers at the October meeting. Following that meeting I propose that we nominate a small group to develop a more detailed and more consensual project plan and outline, and to manage the project from there on.