

RADSTATS : RESPONSIBLE STATISTICS

AND RESPONSIBLE STATISTICIANS

by Ludi Simpson

I was a new student of social statistics in Southampton when I first heard of and joined Radstats in 1977. I went to its AGM fired with enthusiasm for a group which I felt would by example inject some social responsibility into my study, and that of my twenty fellow-students, and provide some organisational back-up for criticisms of our courses' content and running.

I came away with three impressions: a certain amount of anger at navel-gazing and arm-chair philosophising; enough new ideas about socially responsible statistics to maintain my interest; and dismay that there was so little material that I could bring back to other students to help weld ourselves into socially responsible statisticians.

Since then I have been a student, a junior academic statistician, and have now served 4 years as a statistician in local government.

My original hopes for Radstats have not changed and have been fulfilled in about as equal measure as that first AGM. To take them in turn:

Firstly, does Radstats provided "socially responsible statistics"? The term itself is problematical, but I see its existence in the Health and Race Subgroups' products, and in the fire-brigade activities and others, where our numeracy and statistical skills give other movements ammunition to help improve social conditions in Britain.

Radstats can and does provide a service that is one element in counteracting the virtual monopoly of figures and their presentation by official government sources.

The more the state controls information against progressive social change, the more important this informative role of Radstats becomes: to use figures and methods, to which its members have privileged access, to debunk the arguments that aid poverty, war, exploitation and oppression.

In my areas of work this would mean, for example, compiling figures of cuts in education, or statistics on the exploitation of 3rd World peoples by foreign companies.

Secondly, does Radstats encourage and promote "socially responsible statisticians"? Here I don't mean career promotion (although some of that does happen), but nurturing and representing statisticians and users of statistics so that they increasingly produce socially responsible statistics in the above sense, and increasingly refuse to produce statistics that maintain reactionary policies.

Radstats' initial impetus was in this direction, and campaigned successfully against the then CBI director who had been nominated as president of the Royal Statistical Society, and whose sole contribution would have been to ally statisticians with the institutions of big business.

Since then, Radstats has done little in this direction, and our members have tended to work individually within the RSS and other statistician peer groups.

I have realised while working for Local Government that the statistical profession is highly atomised: statisticians tend to be isolated from one other, and our development often relies considerably upon the non-statisticians we work with. This makes it difficult for Radstats to materially influence statisticians' political or social conscience.

However, more could be done to strengthen the RSS' (and the IOS') social conscience, and that of their members. Student statisticians, and those few places where many statisticians work together, could also be fertile ground for study and help from Radstats.

The Education Subgroup with Reading Between The Numbers found a way of encouraging socially responsible statisticians amongst the wide number of people who rely on research studies in education for their attitude to policy. This strategy - "if you can't change the irresponsible professional statisticians, you can swamp them with responsible amateur statisticians" - is one of the valuable elements of 'demystifying' statistics.

The two areas of Radstats' work that I have discussed, providing socially responsible statistics and encouraging socially responsible statisticians, are far from distinct: each re-inforces the other. A statistician has only to pick up a copy of In Defence of the NHS to be encouraged to be socially aware of his or her own statistical influence.

I realise that I have written this to those who feel as fresh as a new student of social statistics. I hope there are many of them around, for there is plenty of scope for energy in Radstats.