

Radical Statistics newsletter

Time for change, but how?

Alison Macfarlane

Since Radical Statistics was formed over 20 years ago, some aspects of the production of our newsletter have changed beyond all recognition, while other aspects have hardly changed at all.

Probably the biggest change is in the technology available. Twenty years ago we sent in articles either as sheets typed on whatever typewriter we could lay our hands on, preferably but not inevitably one with a carbon ribbon, or handwritten, in the hope that someone else would do the typing. Having got everything typed, the editor would assemble the pieces of paper in sequential order and get them copied to form the newsletter, which had A4 sized pages for many years.

Now, of course we have ready access to computing technology which is capable of producing material of professional standard. Most articles arrive on disc. With a bit of luck, all that is needed is to read them into a common format, then make the typeface and layout consistent. Having assembled them into a single file, then page headers and footers and page numbers can be added.

This sounds simple, but the process may not run so smoothly in practice. A much higher standard is now expected and more work is needed as a result. For us amateurs, fiddling around with all of this can be very time consuming. Even after that, what we produce may end up looking amateurish. Given that most of us have much less time than we used to, why don't we pay someone to do the layout and assembly. We could also ask the person we select to start with a redesign of the graphics and layout.

A practice which has never changed is the idea of having a rotating editorship. I can't quite remember why it was decided to do this, but I think it was thought to be more democratic than putting the editorship in the hands of one person. This argument may have something to commend it, but it is always difficult to find volunteers to do an issue. The most difficult task is persuading people to write articles on time, or indeed at all on a one off basis. Might it not be better to have an editorial group?

Such a core group could both ensure continuity and interest people in

writing articles and have a longer lead time to get them to do so? It could still rotate the editorship within or outside it, or one of its members could be appointed editor for several issues.

One of the arguments put forward to explain some people's reluctance to contribute articles is that those who work in universities are under such pressure from the research rating industry that they only feel able to write articles for refereed journals. The suggested solution to this is to turn 'Radical statistics' into a refereed academic journal.

I for one would feel very disappointed if we decided to do this and would see it as giving in to the research ratings industry. It would also be unfair to readers and writers who are not part of it. In addition, if we want to expand our readership, should we be specifically targeting academics anyway?

One of our aims in starting the group was to demystify statistics by writing about them in an accessible way. The academic paper is not exactly a reader friendly art form. It often inspires the author to write in a tediously contorted style that can just about be understood by other members of the academic club, but few others.

I would like to see our readership expand and reach a wider audience. I therefore think we should look at magazine formats as models. For example 'Health matters' has an A4 magazine format. It has topical articles of varying lengths about the politics of health and the NHS, and is well laid out on slightly glossy paper. Another example of an A4 newsletter is 'Maternity action' the newsletter of the Maternity Alliance. 'Critical public health', on the other hand, is in A5 format, with each issue on a particular theme. Alternatively, we may come up with something different from all of these.

The aim of writing this is to provoke discussion, which will, in turn, lead to a decision at our 1997 AGM. There is no need to wait until then if you want to help in improving 'Radical statistics' Why not write something now, for the next issue. The editor will welcome contributions ranging from a short news item, or a few provocative thoughts to a longer article.

Editorial

What sort of publication should Radical Statistics be and what sort of orientation should the RSG take up? Should it change, and if so, in which way? How can we increase our influence? How can we stimulate greater involvement of our members and increase the size of the group? The first two contributions take up some of these issues, both of which aim to stimulate debate and hopefully the next editor will have a bag full of further contributions which should culminate in a live discussion at the next AGM where some decisions will be made.

Danny Dorling addresses the problem of constructing measures to identify disadvantaged areas in terms of health, wealth and happiness. He urges the use of simple measures which directly reflect quality of life which require a 'happiness component' as he believes that health and wealth alone are unable to pick up disadvantage. He is optimistic that disadvantage will take different more marginal forms as the situation of the majority improves.

Ray Thomas provides us with a 'fantasy' of local government in which wide availability and use of local information could encourage participation, enhance local democracy and involvement in the local economy. Perhaps to the extent that people take over and the state 'withers'.

That many women are forced to work to provide for their families may seem evident, yet being the 1990s Catherine Hakim has attempted to resurrect a rather older view that they have a choice in the matter. Jay Ginn provides a very useful critical discussion of this work and shows the difficulties in the way the statistics have been constructed and more recent information shows the extent to which women are 'pressed' into work.

Anne Kenefick asks why health promotion has become an issue with the Tories and emphasises its ideological role in order to shift the emphasis away from the needs of proper health care on to individuals' poor lifestyles, while also looking at it as a possible route to facilitate Government savings.

There are two pieces on what is counted in national accounts statistics each from quite different perspectives. Ray Thomas has provided a preliminary draft of a possible broadsheet which was written with the 1992 general election in mind. This has been edited only to make it a

little more current. Here, it is asked what should be counted in national accounts and highlights some of the anomalies in what is counted and not counted. As he points out, national accounts has little to say about many important matters and can, and is, used authoritatively when its assessments are at best misleading.

Andrew Philpott Morgan reviews an important new book which has reworked national income statistics on a marxist basis redefining concepts and methodologies and provides a broad range of empirical estimates which contrasts with conventional measures. This then provides from this perspective quite a different view of capitalist reality than either conventional accounts or their various extensions.

David Hutton has made the suggestion as a deviation from the serious mould of Radical Statistics that we could instigate a competition on "what is the most outrageous cheating in government statistics in the last..(5?) years?". Now if we could generalise this to encompass the claims of the political parties, particularly during the last general election, then we would have enough material to keep us going for years! Anyone fancy doing this can send it to the next editor.

A reader has sent in a Belsky cartoon from the depths of time before even RSG was a mere twinkle in a few people's eyes. It certainly shows how times have changed.

Radical Statistics: Which way forward?

Andrew Philpott Morgan

There is some debate in advance of the next AGM of the way forward for the Radical Statistics Group and of Radical Statistics itself. My main concern here is how we can increase the quality and range of contributions of articles, and resting on this, how we can get more people involved and therefore extend the influence of the group. We want to recommend it to friends, colleagues, comrades, the press... We want to feel that Radical Statistics will provide something different which we generally won't read elsewhere.

What sort of publication should RS be and who it should be aimed at? I would argue that we need to continue to see RSG as a campaigning group and that we are not looking primarily for nuggets of theoretical wisdom in our pages, but rather articles of practical and political orientation to campaigns over what we see as what is wrong about Government policy, problems in society, inadequate production of or misuse of statistics etc. I believe the academic road would take us away from this orientation.

My suggestion is that we form an editorial group which was briefly mentioned by Ludi Simpson at the last AGM. This group might ideally also include a member of the Troika, or at least a Troika member could attend each meeting. The fact that there would be editorial meetings would be a big improvement on an editor left to her/his own resources. We could still rotate editors from within our membership, but there would also be the experience of continuity of a backing team. The group could support the editor by sharing a division of labour and would actively encourage and nag people in their area of interest (and outside it) to make contributions.

Moreover, it would be useful if the RSG attempted to become involved in a range of campaigns which would certainly be a way of increasing the influence and membership of the group. The actual campaigns and their work could then be reported back in RS. I would certainly like to see the emergence of something along the lines of counter-information services (CIS) of a decade or so ago through which many of us could contribute.

Which campaigns are you involved in? Send details and/or contributions to the next editor.

It is certainly true that most people have more work than in the past particularly academics, but it is also a question of priorities. We need to devise ways of raising the status of RS work so that making a difference to an effective campaign is contrasted to getting a publication in a refereed journal. For those of us in the academic world it is all too easy to be pulled along a particular road which most of us recognise as being necessary to carve out our careers. Yet the view here is that not enough to talk about the world to the enlightened few, but we need to work with the majority to attempt to do something about it.