

Editorial

This issue of Radical Statistics includes three quite different types of article, yet each highlights the relevance of Radical Statistics, its concerns and the spaces it provides for critical debate.

The first is an article by the Radical Statistics Student Essay Competition winner from 2011, Nick Wattie, which addresses one of Radical Statistics' stated aims: exposing the social nature of seemingly 'technical' problems (and 'technical' fixes). In a convincing and very readable piece Nick points out the ubiquity of 'Relative Age Effects' (RAEs) in education, sport and child development. Unlike other authors, who have provided complex mathematical 'solutions' to this problem, Nick argues that the problem is at least in part social, and therefore requires us to re-examine our social institutions. We hope that Nick's article will not only prove interesting to Radical Statistics readers, but also encourage you to participate (or encourage students to participate) in the upcoming **2013 Student Essay Competition**, which will be advertised on the website shortly.

The second is a symposium, organised by Ludi Simpson, which addresses the 1977 Royal Statistics Society presidential election. For those of us who were unaware of it, this may at first appear a somewhat arcane discussion. Yet the symposium highlights a historical turning point, and while the various contributors do not always agree with one another (and in this way the contributions comprise a fascinating document of memory and perspective) it becomes clear that the 1977 election marked the dying days of the RSS operating as an establishment 'old boys club', with decisions made by the great and the good behind closed doors, and the beginning of members' much more active participation. As several contributors document, the election was interwoven with the early days of Radical Statistics, therefore this symposium also documents, and highlights the rationale for, the founding of the Radical Statistics Group. As a side-note, David Hill's suggestion – that RSS members were described as having 'cheated' when they voted for just one

candidate in a multi-post election – is a nice reminder that democratic voting decisions are always dependent on the electorate’s understanding of the particular electoral system and its statistical properties. In this case, in the context of a statistically literate electorate and a simple voting system, perhaps it would have been more surprising if members did not ‘cheat’!

The third group of pieces all, albeit in different ways, highlight the contested and political nature of statistics. The article by David Swanson describes the evolution of the current ‘Big Data’ era. He outlines the dramatic and relatively unregulated growth of the commercial demographics industry in the US (and worldwide). This industry now collects data from multiple different sources, David points out, however, that it remains dependent on the collection and availability of public sector administrative and survey data. As such, the private statistics sector receives a substantial public subsidy.

Paul Spicker’s article explores the way that official statistics are policed by the UK Statistics Agency. He reveals that there is significant ambiguity about what counts as an ‘Official Statistic’. Consequently, the UK Government has been able to make highly problematic statistical statements about ‘troubled families’ (using these as ‘evidence’ for their policies), while avoiding sanction by the UK Statistics Agency, which declares such unofficial-official statistics as outside of their remit.

The theme of governmental misuse of statistics is continued in two brief pieces about statistical policy in Argentina (translated from the Spanish). Both document the ways in which the government of Argentina has succeeded in restricting press and public access to data, while disseminating figures that indicate policy success. The jaw-dropping disregard for statistical scrutiny is striking and reminds us of the ongoing importance of another of Radical Statistics’ founding concerns: who controls statistical investigations and how the information produced is used.

In stark contrast to the preceding pieces, the final article in this section, by Nikki Roda and Claire Barco, describes a community project aimed at opening up the analysis and use of data to less powerful social groups. Nikki and Claire are both part of A2DataDive, a project organised by Open.Michigan, part of the University of

Michigan's outreach programme. DataDives are weekend events, bringing together non-profit organisations which hold lots of data that they'd like to analyse and data analysts willing to help analyse it. This is an organising model that is wholly congruent with Radical Statistics' aims and philosophy, so it would be great to hear in future issues of Radical Statistics about similar projects elsewhere and about what has been achieved.

The newsletter ends with a review of David Hand's *Statistics: A very short introduction* which Frank Houghton commends for its clarity and for the examples used.

If any reader wants to review a book in a future issue of *Radical Statistics*, we want to hear from you. Just contact the editors: editors@radstats.org.uk. Similarly if you have an idea for an article, which you believe would suit the publication, please get in touch.

Rachel Lara Cohen

Larry Brownstein

Alastair Greig

Email: editors@radstats.org.uk