

# **Report: Radical Statistics 2015 Conference: Good data, good policy?**

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The RadStats conference was held the weekend of Friday 6<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March, with the main meeting and AGM on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> at Conway Hall, London WC1. It is worth beginning this report with some background on how the conference organisation and the programme were developed.

At the previous year's conference in March 2014 in Manchester, Humphrey Southall and Jeff Evans offered to take on the Local Organisation of the conference. After some discussion by email among RadStats members in London as to the best venue, Conway Hall was booked in June. There was then a period during which a larger group made suggestions by email about themes and possible speakers. Towards the end of the period, Maurice Marchant from the troika undertook to lead work on finalising the conference theme and programme. He was joined by Alison Macfarlane and Jeff Evans who together with Maurice formed the Programme Committee.

After several iterations of the wording, we agreed on the theme "Good data, good policy?" We agreed to invite several speakers for the first session of the Saturday to speak on some aspect of this theme. For the rest of the day we aimed to facilitate as much involvement from conference participants as possible. Thus we arranged for the second session of the morning to involve break-out sessions where three parallel groups could discuss the issues from the keynote speakers. In the afternoon, we aimed to switch the focus to campaigns led by groups and based on projects whose aims are aligned with those of RadStats, to address the question: "What can we learn from data-based policy initiatives and campaigns?" Here we again had three parallel strands, on: (i) fact-checking of policy claims and strategies for encouraging data driven debates; (ii) ways to engage the users of statistics and whether this would result in improvement of health statistics; and (iii) the impacts of welfare reform and a community agenda for ethnic statistics.

Finally, the last session of the Saturday would focus on the first 40 years of RadStats and what we have learned from this experience for the future.

Thus the programme for the Saturday was as follows. Speakers whose paper or slides have been made available on the RadStats website are marked \*\*.

**Session 1:** (3 key questions)

1. How good are the data we have and are they used well for policy making?
2. What are the threats to the production and democratic use of good statistics?
3. What can be done to improve the situation?

The speakers were:

**Denise Lievesley** (former Head of the UNESCO Statistics Institute, and ex-President of the RSS and of the International Statistics Institute)

**David Walker**\*\* (Head of Policy at the Academy of Social Sciences, and contributing editor to Guardian Public)

**Hetan Shah**\* (Executive Director of the Royal Statistical Society) (\* see the Data Manifesto on the RSS website)

**Gavin Freeguard**\*\* (Senior Researcher at the Institute for Government).

**Session 2:** The break-out groups discussed the three key questions. As an example of the discussions, here are the notes produced by the rapporteur of the group led by Jane Galbraith:

The “threats” and problems we discussed were:

- a) A lot of data remains unanalysed – shortage of resources and motivation to use.
- b) There are new problems in collecting data – due to a drop in public response rates because of mistrust or not seeing relevance.
- c) There is excessive governmental bureaucratic control, particularly in England, over access to and interpretation of data.
- d) There are growing privacy concerns – e.g. those engendered by Snowden revelations, Google and Facebook’s data-collection and mining exposure, & involvement of private companies in healthcare; these lead

to excessive protections in seeking consent, which delay and may hinder genuine social policy research.

We had several suggestions for change:

- a) challenge restrictions in school curricula and build a working knowledge of statistics, benefits of data sharing and problems of data misuse and fraud;
- b) support more community-based projects where data providers have a stake in the research;
- c) practise open approaches which encourage discourse between statisticians, researchers and policy makers;
- d) ensure and emphasise anonymity of participants providing data, with recognition that those at extremes of samples are most at risk of anonymity being threatened;
- e) learn lessons from International Development projects.

**Session 3:** “What can we learn from data-based policy initiatives and campaigns?”

(3A) **Will Moy (Director, Full Fact)**, *Fact checking and the election*

The possible roles for an independent fact checking service in the UK, with plans for a special campaign of information and rebuttal, in the run-up to the 2015 election. Also, ongoing efforts to ensure that the information received by political figures and the media is as clear and useful as possible.

**Jim Ridgway\*\* (Durham University)**, Strategies for Encouraging Data Driven Debates

A collaborative venture with the House of Commons Library to create a powerful data visualisation called *Constituency Explorer* ahead of the 2015 election, providing a ‘playground’ to explore multiple variables disaggregated e.g. by region, and a quiz game (aimed at citizens) that runs on smartphones, along with downloadable datasets for every constituency.

(3B) **Deana Leadbeter\*\* (Statistics Users Executive)**, *Approaches to User Engagement*

The role that the Statistics Users Executive plays in bringing together a wide range of user groups, and in liaising with the Government Statistical Service and other producers, as required by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The latter emphasises the importance of

consulting and meeting the needs not just of government users but also of the wider user community.

**Alison Macfarlane\*\* (Health Statistics User Group)**, *Can users improve official health statistics?*

Focus on the practical experience of the Group in encouraging effective collaboration between producers and users of health and social care statistics, and appropriate use of these statistics, with particular respect to recent cuts in ONS health statistics, and access to NHS data for England for both public health analysis and for research.

**(3C) Christina Beatty (CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University)**, *The Impacts of Welfare Reform on people and places - Hitting the Poorest Places Hardest*

An overview of a set of national reports on the effects of the range of welfare reform measures undertaken by the government, and how these vary considerably across the country or by household types, using government statistics to assess the financial loss and number of households affected for all local authorities in the UK. Also studies which drill down the data to the community level and consider which types of families have been affected.

**Nissa Finney\* (University of Manchester) & Ludi Simpson\* (University of Manchester)**, *Race and ethnic statistics: what more (or less) would a community agenda demand?* (\*See article below.)

A consideration of whether UK race statistics are appropriate for generating evidence of discrimination, or for suggesting necessary policy changes. An opportunity to consider these questions in groups from the perspective of community campaigns concerned with issues such as police violence against black people in custody, employment disadvantage and exploitation for ethnic minorities, and race discrimination in housing agencies.

**Session 4:** Using our past to develop our future? Chaired by John Bibby. Summaries of two of the contributions, by Ludi Simpson and Alison Macfarlane, are included below

**Harvey Goldstein\*\*** A Life in Radical Statistics

**Alison Macfarlane\*\*** Whose priorities? Statistics for health and health care

**Ludi Simpson** Statistics for taking power

**Rachel Cohen\*\*** What is radical about Radical Statistics?

The AGM took place as the last event on Saturday. The minutes are available on the Radical Statistics website. However, we reproduce here the responses of those attending, when asked by Ludi Simpson and Jeff Evans to help compile a list of RadStats achievements 1975-2015. Members' suggestions (with elaborations [in square brackets] by Ludi Simpson):

1. All its publications // *Demystifying Social Statistics* and other linked publications. [Written publications that were influential in health, peace and education campaigns, and have been drawn upon for critical understanding of statistics in society both generally and in applications.]
2. RSS president [Successfully confronting a conservative hierarchy in the UK's main professional statistical body, the Royal Statistical Society, stimulating first a committee election and then a presidential election in which the membership chose unofficial candidates committed to making the Society more open and public-facing.]
3. RSS code of ethics [Continuing to support the Society's adoption of ethical standards for statistical work and public campaigning for independent authoritative official statistics. The Society took on some of the priorities for critical scrutiny of official and other statistical reporting that Radical Statistics had promoted through its meetings, actions and publications. The Society also elected some of Radical Statistics' early members in its committee structure. ]
4. Acceptance by established statistical organisations (e.g. RSS). [including the RSS but others too – as having a point of view worth listening to. Far from turning away from RadStats, sufficient of those who have contributed to RadStats have recommended its relevance within other organisations.]
5. Conferences [An unbroken series of 40 annual conferences with a cumulative attendance of over one thousand.]
6. Maintaining a community / movement of radical statistics in UK / gatherings of like-minded people who connect at conferences [Maintaining a community or network of applied researchers and statisticians with radical politics.]
7. More friendly than most other 'radical' organisations; and longer lasting.

8. Contributed to raising awareness of importance of community-based statistics. // Radstats people played significant role in getting Bradford Community Statistics project established.
9. Contributing to lots of official consultations, notably around the Statistics Act // Contribution towards pointing out the need for statistical independence. [also in defence of the national health service and other issues.]
10. Excellent journal – and all years on the web. [A readable journal running without a break for forty years with an estimated annual average of 100 pages.]

Nevertheless, the weekend was not all talk. The Friday evening social at the Lucas Arms pub near Conway Hall began with a review by Julian Wells and Larry Brownstein\*\* of the book *Capital in the 21st Century* (2013) by Thomas Piketty, and continued over drinks and food. And on the Sunday, a professionally guided walking tour of Holborn area, in central London was enjoyed by a small group of stalwart walkers.