

STS36 Democracy and Statistics

Paper by

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Title: Statistics for the people? The role of official statistics in the democratic debate

1. Introduction and Abstract

Official statistics inform decisions right across society; and those decisions affect the lives of us all. For example, funding for public services, in determining economic and social policies and in the commercial decisions of businesses. They are also essential to the public understanding of our society, economy and of the performance of government.

It is therefore axiomatic that good official statistics are essential to the proper functioning of a democratic state. However, the meaning of „good statistics“ deserved careful consideration, as goodness is not an intrinsic quality; it is a much broader concept than „accuracy“.

The importance of official statistics to society has been likened by Sir Michael Scholar, the Chair of the UK Statistics Society, to that of 'clean water' or 'sound money' - things without which society starts to fall apart - and often they have been described as the 'backbone' of democratic debate. As Professor Hans Rosling put it:

“In a democracy, decision making is ultimately made by the people, therefore statistics cannot only be the book-keeping of the state. It must be understood and used by many.”

This paper examines the extent to which this vision has been, and could be, realised, based on the experiences of the UK statistical system, and from the perspective of the UK Statistics Authority.

The UK Statistics Authority was established in 2008 to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. „Serving the public good“ is interpreted in a broad sense to mean that statistics are designed to be used in a way that benefits society, not just government. So the concept of promoting the public good can be seen as encouraging not just the production of statistics but their effective communication and support to those can make beneficial use of them.

From its inception the Authority has argued that the value of statistics can only be realised by an understanding of their utility and use. Statistics can only genuinely inform the citizen and the democratic debate if the focus of the producer is on their utility. The first of the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics talks about the „test of practical utility“. And we can approach utility in simple steps: if people do not know the statistics exist, they will not use them; if people do not understand the statistics, they cannot properly use them; and, if people do not trust the statistical service, they will not believe the statistics and the messages arising out of them.

So to what extent has „utility“ in these terms been realised in the context of democratic debate and decision making in the UK, and what more can be done to achieve it?

We need to look at what steps have been taken, and could be taken further, to connect more directly official statistics with the democratic process. For example: to produce statistics for the relevant units of democratic accountability; to produce statistics at relevant times in the electoral cycle; and in ways which are most accessible before and during an election period.

This paper sets out to chart what is being done, and what might be done further, to make the statistical product more beneficial in the democratic context. Three central and inter-related propositions are considered in turn, principally in the context of the UK's Code of Practice for Official Statistics:

- **Utility** – that statistics derive their value from their use and that *a priori* the concepts of „use“ and of the „user“ must be understood in the broadest of terms if the statistics are to serve the public good;
- **Accessibility** – that to be of use the statistics must be available to, and intelligible by, the citizen and that this requires a narrative that offers helpful explanation from a source that can be trusted.
- **Relevance** – that the statistics should be germane to the democratic debate, not only in their subject matter, but also through their availability and accessibility in ways that are relevant to the democratic process and cycle.

2. Utility

It is, perhaps, common cause that statistics derive their value from their use. (In English, the word value has a slippery meaning but here we have in mind the actual good that something does rather than just its potential in that regard.) Certainly, in the present straightened economic circumstances a failure to demonstrate clearly the utility of a particular set of official statistics is liable to lead to their swift demise.

However, if the idea of „use“ as a yardstick of value has not been often subject to challenge *per se*, the question of who and what may be considered the legitimate users or uses of statistics in this context has been, historically, deeply contested.

The approach implicitly favoured by successive UK governments toward official statistics, culminating in the approach of the government in the early 1980's, tended toward a narrow conception of use in relation to value. Under the review of official statistics conducted by Derek Rayner, and what subsequently became known as the „Rayner Doctrine“, official statistics were to be produced, explicitly, for the benefit of government.

In those days, government departments which produced statistics were required to examine the utility, and therefore the value, of the statistics in terms of the role they played in informing government Ministers and government policy. Any wider societal value was at best secondary or at worst incidental, a spill-over from the primary cause for producing those statistics in the first instance.

However, over the succeeding 30 years this rationale came under sustained challenge in public discourse. And, official statistical policy gradually evolved to reclaim notions of broader public benefit in decisions about the production and publication of official statistics.

The 1993 White Paper on Open Government marked the beginning of a turning point in the government's official position on the subject when it said

„Official statistics are collected by governments to inform debate, decision making and research both within government and by the wider community. They provide an objective perspective of the changes taking place in national life and allow comparisons between periods of time and geographical areas‘

In part, this was because successive government's discovered that such an explicit focus on statistical production for its own benefit or use seemed, paradoxically, to threaten the utility

of the statistics to government itself. By the early 1990s employment statistics, for example, were regarded with such suspicion as a tool of government propaganda rather than objective fact to base policy discussion around, that they ceased to be very useful as either. Decisions to reduce costs associated with the compilation and production of the National Accounts in the then Central Statistical Office made in the 1980s (following the Rayner reviews), were short-sighted, and came to have serious consequences for users, especially government users, by the end of the decade.

And in part, this was due to a broader evolution of the discussion about the purpose and role of the state in relation to its citizens, and what the citizens might trust their institutions of state to do in their name and for their benefit.

However, whilst that sentiment was the official line, many government bodies that produced statistics arguably continued to employ their own version of the Rayner doctrine right up to the creation of the Statistics Authority in 2008. Transforming official doctrine into official practice had proved a task not to be under-estimated.

On 1 April 2008, almost 30 years after the Rayner reviews, the *Statistics and Registration Service Act* became law in the UK. This set in statute an obligation on the newly created Statistics Authority to „promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the *public good*“. It was a legal imperative for official statistics to leave behind the mere „book-keeping of the state“ once and for all, and a sound foundation from which to develop official statistics for the „many“. The ambition of the Authority was to translate this objective into reality.

The new Act also required the Authority to prepare and publish a *Code of Practice for Official Statistics* to apply to all official statistics produced in the UK. Adopted in January 2009, this has formed the basis for a statutory programme of auditing or „assessing“ all UK official statistics.

The first principle enshrined in the Code is that the production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public. And, the first practice in the Code demands of statistical producers that they engage effectively with users of statistics to promote trust and maximise public value.

By July 2011 nearly 150 statutory assessments of more than 550 sets of statistics had been conducted and published as individual reports. The two principal findings of this body of work were that, to improve compliance with the Code, statistical producers should improve commentary (see below) and improve engagement with users. About 225 requirements for producers to improve user engagement and the ways in which they meet user needs have been made, and had either been implemented by the producers or were in the process of being implemented.

A summary of the findings of these Assessments concluded that

“...more systematic engagement with organisations and individuals whose decisions or actions are informed by official statistics is required. Users of statistics within central government can usually find ways to make their needs known and to ensure that they are met; users outside central government – business, local government, academia, and charities for example – find this more difficult but in aggregate their use is of immense value. Engagement with these wider users is therefore likely to require more effort and imagination but will be repaid in terms of public value”.

The UK National Statistician, the professional head of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) in the UK, similarly set out plans for the system as a whole to further improve user

engagement and commentary as part of her over-arching strategy for development of the GSS.

One of the main effects of this process has been, therefore, to encourage statistical producers to think more broadly about who the users of statistics are. That is to say, thinking beyond the „user“ as a principal policy customer within their department, or a secondary policy customer in another department, or a small number of expert users, but to a much wider range of users reflecting more the plurality of societal interests.

Crucially this process is also focussed upon thinking about the *potential* users and uses of the statistics, and to documenting these, as well as recording established uses. The Authority sees this as critical to opening up and expanding the statistical terrain, and thereby realising the value of official statistics to all citizens in the democratic debate. This ambition leads directly to questions of accessibility. Potential users of statistics are, almost by definition, likely to be organisations and people who are not very familiar with the statistics and may not be sure how to access them.

3. Accessibility

A logical pre-requisite for utility is accessibility. People cannot beneficially use statistics that they do not know exist or that they do not properly understand.

Accessibility requires that official statistics are publicised in ways that allows users to identify and access information relevant to their needs; provides easy to use entry points to access information; and, ensure that statistics are released in forms that encourage re-use.

For official statistics to be understood in ways that deliver value, it is also important that appropriate written advice or („narrative“ or „commentary“) is published alongside the figures themselves. For official statistics to contribute fully to the democratic debate this is essential.

This narrative needs to be accessible to the broad range of users, and potential users, as described above, not restricted to the expert or established user. The narrative should be seen as the heart of every statistical release, not just the minimum text needed to accompany tables, nor just a brief introduction for the non-expert user.

Commentary, in this view, is not the cherry on the statistical cake. The commentary in a real sense *is* the statistics – and certainly will be for the vast majority of users who consume their statistics through that commentary or interpretations of it.

As with utility, the concepts of accessibility and narrative are central to the Code of Practice and to assessment of official statistics against that Code.

Principle 8 of the Code describes how official statistics should be accompanied by full and frank commentary that should be readily accessible to all users. Alongside relevant practices which nest under this principle in the Code, the Authority has also published various notes and guidance on what such a narrative should contain.

These include some of the bare necessities – summary of the main messages, language that is straightforward and widely understood, a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the figures – and some more developed concepts.

For example, the Authority looks for commentary to provide an explanation of statistics that goes further than simply describing rises and falls (sometimes known as „elevator“ commentary.) It looks for a narrative that brings to life the story that the statistics contain, making suitable comparisons over time or space, and providing relevant factual information

about the policy context, considering why the statistics are important, to whom and how they will be likely to be used.

In this way the statistics can make their world into the rough and tumble of political debate with an impartial, objective, explanation provided as to their meaning. It offers a „head start“ to the non-expert citizen user, pressed for time and with multiple sources of information to select from, so as to better use the information themselves.

Full and frank commentary is also helpful to ease the passage of the statistical messages into the media world – the source from which the vast majority of people are likely to encounter and consume official statistics. Good statistical narrative not only helps people to understand and use the statistics, it also allows inaccurate reporting to be shown to have no basis. It cannot itself, of course, stop inaccurate reporting. But, commentators and the public can much more easily challenge inaccurate reporting, or inaccurate statements, made in the political fray, if the official statistics are themselves accompanied with narrative that aids interpretation and signals what the statistics do and do not say.

Over the course of the first two years of the assessment programme „requirements“ relating to the need to improve commentary have been the single most numerous category – more than 250 in total – which have all either been implemented or are in the process of being implemented.

Set alongside this, many examples of existing good practice have also been identified. Various projects and task forces have been initiated within the GSS to promulgate such good practice, and to provide advice and guidance for government statisticians on these matters.

So, much progress has been made, but it would fair to say, more is still needed. Assessment reports still routinely identify the need for improved commentary in most statistical releases. The Authority fully supports the project of work initiated by the National Statistician to address the issue of textual explanation that accompanies the release of statistics across the GSS, and it is hoped that, in time, this will lead to a more pro-active approach by the statistical producer in this respect.

Nevertheless, as with broadening the concept of users and utility, the case for improved narrative still faces barriers in making the transition from doctrine to reality.

The reasons for this are complex. In part there is historical legacy. In the past it was, to an extent, part of the statistician’s job description to be „boring“. Echoes of this still occasionally make their way into official thought.

That is not to say that there has been previously no expectation that professional government statisticians should provide full and frank commentary around the numbers. Written advice – commentary – has often been provided by good statisticians as unpublished briefing for their Ministers. Indeed, this has long been one of the most important parts of the job of a senior government statistician.

However, persuading departmental colleagues of the merits of published narrative, or the wider public benefit that could be derived from the use of a particular set of statistics, is not necessarily easy or straightforward, nor will it necessarily be seen as helpful to the particular goals the Minister has set her department.

Democratising official statistics in this way involves not only challenging pockets of thinking established and embedded over decades, but also risks exposing the power asymmetries that exist between Government statisticians and the wider Government machine.

Under the UK system departmental statisticians report to the National Statistician on a „dotted-line“ basis but formally to their departmental Permanent Secretary and Minister. The department is their employer, not the statistical service and in the event of any tension, the pull of departmental loyalty can be strong and must be answered with clear and strong statistical principles.

In 2009, the Cabinet Secretary issued guidance which made clear the standing that departmental statisticians should be accorded when considering statistical matters. However, Government Ministers ultimately control the budgets and priorities within their own Departments and, whilst departmental statisticians are rarely faced with any direct pressure to put favourable interpretation on their statistics, there is an understandable culture of caution, and a degree of inhibition. This can lead to a reserved approach to offering advice on interpretation when the statistics are published. The Statistics Authority is opposed to this. When statistics are controversial, the public need more guidance not less. This is one respect in which the democratic agenda is directly in opposition to strands of existing culture.

The Statistics Authority does not exercise direct power in these matters. It is an independent non-Ministerial Department reporting to Parliament, but its powers are limited. The Code is statutory but there is no power to compel compliance, beyond what we might term „name and shame“ and a withdrawal of the „National Statistics“ quality mark – public criticism.

This power in itself should not be under-estimated, but is a hand that requires playing carefully. This paper has so far focussed mainly on the gains achieved via formal assessment against the Code of Practice in respect of accessibility and utility, but also of note are a range of other tools that the Authority has made use of.

These include high-profile public interventions many of which attract significant media attention, short Monitoring Briefs or longer Monitoring Reports. Many have also related directly to these questions and sought to encourage behaviour change in ways consistent with these aspects of the Code.

Just this month in a letter to a Parliamentary Select Committee, the chair of the Statistics Authority, laid out plainly our position:

“It is, regrettably, sometimes argued that if the statistics are controversial, it is best for statisticians to avoid risk and to maintain a low profile, by offering minimal comment and commentary. We wholly disagree with this view and we are supporting the National Statistician's project to improve official statistical commentary across the board.”

Nevertheless, these are tools which can only be used sparingly to remain effective and ultimately do not have power of material sanction.

So, this may be a long and challenging process involving significant cultural change, skills development, and a challenge to established power dynamics, but it must be considered central to the project of democratising official statistics in the UK

4. Relevance

The UK Statistics Authority has an unusual, even unique, position as a public body in relation to the UK Parliament.

The legislation which established the Authority was subject to considerable debate in both the Houses of the UK Parliament during 2006 and 2007, and this helped to bring a range of statistical issues to the fore. The thrust of the legislation and the creation of the Authority enjoyed support from all the political parties at Westminster. Under the terms of the Statistics Act the Authority is an independent non-Ministerial Department which reports directly to the UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In practice, this has meant that the Authority routinely and publicly reports to a cross-party parliamentary committee (a „select committee“) the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC). The Authority has also reported to other select committees on issues of interest to them, for example: about migration statistics to the Home Affairs Committee; benefits statistics to the Work and Pensions Committee, and; road casualty statistics to the Transport Committee.

In addition, Parliament is directly involved in scrutinising the selection and appointment of the Authority Chair through what is known as a „pre-appointment hearing“ undertaken by PASC. The Chair’s appointment is then subject to a debate and vote on the floor of the House of Commons.

This provides a unique opportunity for the Authority to develop its relationship with Parliament and parliamentarians, and means that the Authority is potentially well placed to understand and respond to their needs. Indeed, the Chair of PASC, Bernard Jenkin MP, recently described the Authority as “Parliament’s enforcer of impartial statistics”. In the exercise of these functions, the Authority has sought to put official statistics at the heart of the democratic debate in Parliament.

An obvious way to further connect official statistics more directly to the democratic process is to provide official statistics at the relevant units of democratic accountability. An important relationship exists between the statistical service and the institutions of democracy; in the UK this relationship is particularly with the UK Parliament and also the devolved legislatures (in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) who have been granted degrees of legislative competence over certain areas of local policy-making.

The basic unit of parliamentary democratic accountability is the 'parliamentary constituency'. Statistics for parliamentary constituencies provide elected representatives, their constituents and analysts with information on the area represented in the legislature. The potential importance of this within the democratic process is mostly self-evident. They can assist voters in holding to account those elected to represent them, particularly at election-time. And they can also be used by parliamentarians in holding Government to account. They are valuable to those who provide elected representatives with research and information about their local area and how it might compare with others, and they can be used by those who report on politics and government to describe and compare the situation in the areas associated with particular representatives.

The UK Statistics Authority is currently undertaking a review of the availability and accessibility of statistical information at parliamentary constituency-level. A number of commentators, both inside and outside the UK Parliament, have noted the „patchiness“ of data at UK parliamentary constituency-level. The Code of Practice for Official Statistics does not contain a specific requirement to produce statistics for special geographies such as constituencies, although it does require that statistics be produced to meet user needs

where possible and in as much detail as reliable and practicable. The Authority's report will be published during autumn 2011.

A second way to better connect the world of official statistics with the democratic process is to produce statistics at relevant points in time with the electoral cycle. The UK's position in this respect is perhaps best characterised as being one of trying to rise above the electoral process or even to be impervious to it. Normal practice for civil servants – and official statisticians are civil servants – during election periods is to maintain silence, or „purdah“, for fear of being drawn into the electoral fray and being accused of acting in politically partial ways. Guidance is issued centrally at each election and contains various restrictions on usual activity which must be followed.

Official statisticians are not fully subject to these restrictions, or at least not to the same extent, as other civil servants. Official statistics continue to be released during an election campaign according to a pre-announced timetable. Release dates are indicated twelve months in advance by the producing department, in accordance with the Code of Practice, and are thus well before the date of a General Election is known.

For example, during the 2010 Spring General Election in the UK, the Office for National Statistics announced the first release of that quarter's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) statistics. These were of intense media interest and relevance to the campaign, showing whether or not the UK was coming out of recession (it was). These figures were released only days before the election itself. Despite this, statisticians provided commentary as usual and announced the figures at a live televised press conference where the chief economist explained the statistics and took questions from the press.

Statisticians are, nevertheless, not entirely free to continue as normal in an election period. Central guidance issued by the Cabinet Secretary, the head of the Civil Service, encourages all civil servants to do their best to avoid controversy during the election. In this way, the usual pressures to err on the side of caution or to show restraint around describing statistical stories of public interest, may be considered to be magnified, particularly for statisticians in policy departments. But, in the main, the official statistical machine rolls on, election or no election.

The release of GDP statistics in April 2010 also highlighted the iniquities of the system by which Ministers and their advisors receive privileged access to statistics before they are published – known as „pre-release access“. Under these rules the Prime Minister received advance notification of the GDP figures at a time, as it happened, shortly before the national televised party „leaders“ debate“, thus giving him a considerable advantage over his rivals. More broadly, the Authority has long argued that the current system of pre-release access provides Ministers with an unfair head-start over Parliament, the media and the public, and provides an opportunity to spin the figures which is unjustifiable and unhelpful to improving public confidence in government statistics. In short, pre-release access may be considered un-democratic. The Authority will continue to argue that the rules governing pre-release should be determined by it, not by Ministers, and that these rules should be tightened considerably so that pre-release is much reduced, if not abolished altogether.

Notwithstanding the vagaries of pre-release access, how could official statistics more pro-actively embrace the democratic process of elections? One suggestion which has been made periodically is to produce a statistical publication *specifically* designed for use by electors before and during an election. This could take the form of a layperson's guide to the nation's key statistics, with indicators of government performance over time, perhaps with changes of administration prominently indicated in such time series, and including data at relevant geographies, including at the Parliamentary Constituency level.

Two barriers to producing such a guide have tended to be cited, one practical and one political. The practical barrier stems from the uncertainty of the date of a General Election. All previous elections have been announced with about four weeks notice by the Prime Minister of the day, making it difficult to plan or prepare any election specific statistical outputs. This barrier may now have been removed, at least in respect of the next General Election, with the proposed adoption of a fixed five-year term for Parliament and therefore a greater degree of certainty around the next election date, provided that the incumbent Government is able to serve its full term.

The second barrier may be more intractable. It may be considered too difficult or too contentious for official statisticians to select *which* are the key statistical indicators, and which are the ways in which they are best measured, since such decisions may be considered inherently political, all the more so at election time. One approach might be to seek prior agreement of the political parties, in advance, to such a set of indicators. But, in a political system as adversarial as that in the UK, such agreement might be very difficult to realise in practice.

Therefore there is no reason, in principle, why the statistical service could not make available the fullest possible amount of statistical data, including data at Parliamentary Constituency level, in good time ahead of an election, specifically for that election and the electors. It could also be provided to a recognised intermediary (i.e. the UK Royal Statistical Society or to the House of Commons Library) to produce such a guide. But for official statisticians to further attempt a selection and presentation of that data in „guide“ form may be seen to be a step too far.

Does this question push too far the boundaries of what a civil servant may do? This may be an indication of the natural limitations to the potential role of official statisticians in democratic debate. Or, are our current definitions of what a public statistical service is, and what it can do, too constrained to fully meet our goal of providing statistics for the people?