

Scottish Official Statistics conference, 6th October 2016

Can we thrive?

What I want to focus on is whether official statistics continue to be relevant in a changing world.

This focus was triggered by the recent [GSS conference in Manchester](#). At this conference, I was struck by the interest in data.

There was a lot of focus on phrases where data is one of two key words: preceded by the words Big, or Open, or Linked; or followed by Science or Campus or Sharing. But accompanying this data focus there was a sense of unease about the less prominent focus on official statistics themselves. One attendee raised this after a session on open data. She said that as a statistician working on official statistics outputs, she was made to feel like a second class citizen.

Threats

What I think she was doing was reflecting a sense of pride in official statistics. That they are a huge asset. But also that they are under threat. Threats abound – threats to the value of statistics. Like any asset. Any asset faces threats to its value from being misused; of becoming obsolete; or being poor quality.

It's the same with statistics.

- Misuse of statistics. That is, misuse in the public realm, in public debate. And you don't have to look very far to find evidence of this. So much so that we've started to hear about the age of post truth politics. Or as the Economist recently put on its front cover: [The Art of the Lie: Post-truth politics in the age of social media](#). All of this suggests that there is a risk of low public confidence in official statistics because of the way they are sometimes used.
- Obsolescence. This was the heart of the [Bean Review](#): how can economic statistics adapt to a changing economy – to maintain their relevance and avoid becoming obsolete. And more broadly, this question of obsolescence may arise in an era of excitement of new opportunities created by rapid access to new forms of data.
- Poor quality. This is the heartland of the Authority's regulatory work. We look at lots of statistics, and quite often what undermines them isn't misuse or obsolescence; it's that they've got quality issues or they're not providing much insight.

So: here's my core question. How far are official stats vulnerable to these threats? Are people who produce official statistics doomed to be second class citizens in the age of data? Are we victims of the art of the lie?

Above all, can we thrive?

YES, IF

My answer is: *yes,...if.*

Yes we can thrive *if* we attend to the core values that have made statistics so essential to Government for many years.

Yes, *if* we focus on the core properties of trustworthiness, quality and value.

Let's take each of them in turn.

Trustworthiness, Quality, Value

Trustworthiness: This means that the statistics are produced free from any vested interest, and that they represent the best professional judgement of statisticians acting in accordance with the highest standards. The [Code of Practice](#) is particularly strong on the measures and practices that show that the statistical producer is worthy of trust.

And there's a really good example in [GERS – Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland](#). GERS shows the benefits of really dedicated focus on building trustworthiness – through excellent user engagement, and through huge efforts to be clear and open about how GERS is produced. Here's a thought experiment. Would GERS be so widely used if it wasn't published as official statistics, but instead as a research report. Or as open data? I don't think so.

Quality: It means that the statistics are the best available estimate of what they purport to measure and at the same time are not materially misleading. A good example of a focus on quality is the police recorded crime statistics for Scotland. We recently gave these statistics their National Statistics status. This decision shows the benefits of sustained focus on question of quality by the statisticians and the police themselves. I'd really recommend looking at the [Framework of Assurance](#) document produced by the Scottish Government. It's really a leading example from across the UK of how to think about assurance on quality on the context of crime statistics. And again, you really wouldn't get that sense of quality mattering from just putting out management information or open data.

Value: This is that statistics are not just collect and count but inform public debate. One way of doing this is through a focus on coherence – not just on a statistic in isolation, but how it relates to other statistics that cover the same issues. This is really shown by the [ISD website](#). This not only provides good access to individual statistics, but it also groups statistics on key issues, like waiting times, together, and

releases them in a coherent way. This gives a clear picture of Scotland's healthcare – much clearer than the equivalent picture for England.

The new regulatory office

So what's our role in this? Well, as the Authority's regulatory arm, our role is to act as a champion of official statistics.

We already do a lot. We assess National Statistics. We oversee the Code. We speak publicly on misuse.

But that's not enough. The recent Bean Review highlighted two weaknesses.

- The role of regulation is lost within a confusing Authority identity.
- The way we've done the work is too process-y, insufficiently focused on value of statistics in broadest sense.

So we are going to address these weaknesses through creation of a new Office – a clearer identity and a much stronger purpose of public value.

We can thrive

Back to main theme: can official statistics thrive?

And the answer is simple. Yes.., if.

Yes, if we focus on these core principles of trustworthiness, quality and value. And if we resist the temptation to pretend that we're something we're not – data scientists or Big Data specialists. That is not trying to pass ourselves off as something else that sounds more fashionable.

Yes, official statistics will thrive if we focus on our underlying principles.

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