

Whose trust matters most?

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The importance of building trust in official statistics has been recognised by governments and official statisticians for decades. But in their efforts to enhance trust, statisticians may not have stopped to analyse the problem in the way that professional analysts should. Statistical offices should be asking whose trust is needed, whose trust is needed most, and what exactly is it that they want those people to trust?

This paper proposes a flexible framework for promoting trust that identifies the different stakeholders and distinguishes the various 'objects of trust'. We explore the possible perverse effects of focusing too much on one type of trust, and look at how adopting a considered and well balanced framework could guide statistical agencies.

In the introduction to a 1999 UK Parliamentary paper entitled *Building Trust in Statistics*¹, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair MP, said:

"I believe that having access to official statistics which we can all trust is essential in any healthy society. Statistics encourage debate, inform decision making both inside and outside government and allow people to judge whether the Government is delivering on its promises. For official statistics to play that key role effectively in a democracy, we need to have confidence in the figures themselves."

"Our aim is to build a platform that will establish the UK as a world leader in the provision of quality statistical information - statistics based on high professional standards and acknowledged to be honest, dependable and accessible."

Here was an ideal: that everyone, everywhere, should have confidence in all the official figures produced in the UK and that quality should be seen in terms of the statistics being based on high professional standards, plus honesty, dependability and accessibility. Implicit in this is that trust in official statistics matters. Whilst it is not spelled out, there is an understanding in the words used that statistics that are not trusted are not useful, and that any loss of utility can have a major negative impact on society, the economy and democracy.

As a statement of the ideal, it is probably good enough. But like most ideals it is an aspiration; it cannot be achieved. In that sense it risks disempowering the statistical authorities rather than strengthening them. If they adopt this goal at face value, then they are bound to fail, and the certainty of failure relieves them of the obligation to achieve anything specific.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/uk-statistical-system/history/key-historical-documents/building-trust-in-statistics.pdf>

Failure is certain because there will always be people who have little confidence in official figures. In the UK there are strong indications that many journalists in the national news media and a sizeable proportion of the general public do not have much confidence in official statistics and that this mindset is both long established and based on a generalised distrust of officialdom rather than being anything to do with the way the statistics are prepared. In reality, the UK statistical system is at least as good as most around the world, and demonstrably better than many. But it is still sure to fail to achieve anything approaching universal trust.

Constituencies of trust

If the ideal of everyone trusting all official statistics is simply a vague aspiration, is there a way to give it focus, to specify something that can actually be achieved? Part of the statement quoted above is that *“statistics encourage debate, inform decision making both inside and outside government and allow people to judge whether the Government is delivering on its promises”*. Accepting that as a good summary, it points to specific ‘constituencies’ whose trust is particularly important. However, by the time we have added together everyone involved in debating matters of social and economic consequence; those who are involved in taking decisions that might be informed by official statistics; and those who might wish to form a view on whether the government is delivering on its promises (for example at the time of democratic elections), we might well conclude that a very wide range of people must be in the target group, and thus there is little scope here to focus our aspirations.

But perhaps we can take pursue this argument in another way. Some people take bigger decisions or play a bigger role in public debate than others, and the trust of these more influential people is arguably a higher priority for the statistical producers than that of those who have lesser interest or influence. So whilst all potential users of official statistics matter – and that means virtually every person in the country and many beyond – some users will matter more in practice and this does offer a possible way to create some more specific goals.

How then is a statistical office to identify and target the people whose confidence in its outputs is most important and can most readily be enhanced. Historically, national statistical offices have tended to focus their confidence-building plans and actions on government ministers and officials in central government, and take relatively few proactive steps to build the confidence of others outside government. Whilst at first sight this ‘government-first’ approach may seem reasonable given the accountability of statistical offices to the administration in power, there is a real risk that it will not be enough and, indeed, may not deliver confidence even within the government system itself.

In practice, confidence in the national statistical service among government ministers and their senior officials is heavily influenced by the views of commentators and experts *outside* government. Put simply, ministers and officials spend more time listening and talking to those external voices than to their own statisticians.

In the case of the UK, these external commentators include prominent journalists, research organisations, institutes, universities, think tanks, trades unions and so on. On controversial issues - for example the level and impact of immigration - ministers and government officials

are acutely aware of what these various groups and constituencies believe and whether they accept the official figures. Inevitably ministers' and officials' own confidence in the figures is affected by the perceptions of the external commentators.

Statisticians, by their nature, tend to stop analysing things when a problem becomes too ill-defined. The true answer to the question of whose trust matters most is a constantly evolving and dynamic mix of influential people, and is impracticable to pin down at a point in time. But even without a full answer, it is clear that the constituencies that really matter are much broader than those that are usually targeted through traditional user engagement activities. That in turn implies that broadening the base of confidence outside government should be a priority, regardless of whether the targeting of steps in that direction is exactly right.

A 'rule of thumb' approach would be to target all those individuals who are likely to have substantial influence – either on the use of statistics in public debate or on confidence in those statistics. We might call these people the 'opinion-formers': those whose views will lead and influence the views of others, including ministers and their officials in government.

The opinion-formers include politicians at national and local level, journalists, commentators, business leaders, trade union leaders, local government leaders and officials, prominent academics, charities, research bodies, pressure groups and others. Whilst this sounds like a very large and diverse community, it may not be so many individuals in practice. In a country the size of the UK (circa 60 million) there are perhaps only a few hundred people (or less) within these groups whose views are genuinely influential and it is not too hard to identify these people – or at least identify a good proportion of them. Their views are often already in the public domain, and their identities are often known to one another. For example, leading academics in a particular field know who the other influential voices are in that field. So whilst the question of who the influential people are cannot be fully answered at any one time, a pragmatic strategy can be found.

Central to that strategy is that statistical offices must target their confidence building measures on those influential people who can easily be identified and do so in a way that helps to identify the less obvious ones. This need not be a difficult strategy to pursue. Where public confidence in official statistics is a concern – and in the UK that has not changed since the parliamentary paper of 1999 quoted at the start of this paper – it is necessary, though not sufficient, to work at the level of named individuals. The statistical office must find the people whose views on the trustworthiness of their products are most influential and talk to them, and do so in a systematic and structured way. This has the added virtue of being specific, targetable and measurable – at least in the sense that having drawn up a list of named individuals, it is possible to keep records of when those individuals were contacted and the views they expressed, and thus to monitor change over time.

Two surveys of the views of opinion formers about official statistics have been conducted in the UK. In 2005 the Statistics Commission published *Official Statistics: Perceptions and Trust*², a report which incorporated the results of survey work conducted by MORI. The

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/archive/statistics-commission-archive/research/report-24--official-statistics---perceptions-and-trust.pdf>

Statistics Commission's summary of the main messages, reflecting the issues of the day, demonstrate the insight that can be gleaned from systematic and thoughtful conversations with opinion formers:

- On the whole, the interviewees believed that the quality of UK official statistics was up with the best in the world. But there was a recognition that there was still scope for improvement.
- There was a widely-held view that there needed to be greater distance between the producers of statistics and government, possibly with an independent regulatory body which would monitor the use of official statistics.
- The increasing emphasis on performance indicators and targets had meant that official statistics were perceived as sometimes being pushed too far, beyond what they were capable of measuring.
- There was a need for a greater range of comparable statistics for the four countries of the UK.
- There was a view that Government statisticians could improve their communication with users, for example being clearer about the reasons for revisions and providing a fuller explanation of the figures. And also that the media could play a more constructive part in interpreting data.

It is noteworthy that the emerging idea of “an independent regulatory body which would monitor the use of official statistics” was at the core of the statistical legislation launched by the UK Government the year after survey results were published.

The second survey of opinion formers' views was commissioned by the UK Statistics Authority, and conducted by IPSOS-MORI in December 2009; the results were incorporated in the Authority's 2010 report *Strengthening User Engagement*³ and provide a rich insight into opinion formers' perceptions of the production of official statistics, their use and treatment, and user engagement, as well as about the UK Statistics Authority itself. By way of illustration of the strategic insights identified:

- The increasing availability of considerable volumes of data suggests that the clear labelling of official statistics is important.
- Strong support for the inclusion of contextual information when new statistics are released.
- Statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (the UK's National Statistical Institute) were regarded more positively than those produced by other government departments.
- Mixed views on the quality of UK official statistics – most regarding quality as high, albeit with some concerns such as migration and crime; some regarding statisticians as overly conservative in producing accurate statistics, but slowly; and some keen to see changes in society and the economy reflected in statistical definitions and classifications whilst others are keen to maintain unbroken time-series.

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/reports/strengthening-user-engagement--final-report.pdf>

Objects of trust

So far in this paper we have sidestepped the most central question – what is it that we want those opinion-formers to trust. It is a truism that official statistics by their nature are not intrinsically trustworthy. They are estimates based on the best information available at the time the estimate was made. Or at least that is what they should be, and that is one of the things that people want to have confidence in. Sometimes of course, they are not very good estimates, just – one hopes - better than other estimates that might have been made at the same time. Viewed from the user perspective, it is not hard to identify several different things that the user wants to have confidence in:

- That published official statistics on a topic are the most directly relevant and up-to-date on that topic. We might say that the statistics need to be the '**right statistics**'. It should be noted here that the topic is as defined by the user, not the producer of the statistics. Crime statistics illustrate this need. A senior police officer using UK crime statistics might want to know about crime that has been reported to the police. A social researcher might want to know about society's experience as victims of crime. These are different things but both are valid concepts of 'crime'. UK crime statistics have some well-documented problems but they do cover both these aspects in a clear and unambiguous way.

Because 'right statistics' is a user-defined concept it is important for the statistical service to consult users regularly, for example about work programmes; at the same time, user satisfaction surveys can identify concerns and emerging priorities.

- That official statistics have been produced according to the best methods available. We might call this '**right methods**'. Taking the crime statistics example, it is not enough that there should be sample survey data on crime victimisation. Such a sample survey needs to be done to the highest professional standards, consistently over time, or else the results may simply mislead and not be deserving of trust. Implicit in 'right methods' is a need to provide reassurance that the data from which the statistics are derived are sufficiently quality-assured. Data from administrative systems is rarely exactly what it seems to be – and in high profile cases, such as police recorded crime data, the statistical producer requires a degree of assurance so that they can explain to users the strengths and limitations in relation to use. So to complement 'right methods' we might think about 'right data' and 'right quality'.

Many users will not be in a position to make informed judgements about 'right methods', but some – academics or specialist commentators, for example – *will* be in such a position. And so close engagement with these experts can pay dividends, both in informing the development of new methods but also in negating damaging public arguments about methods. Likewise, producers may not be able to conduct detailed quality assurance, such as statistical audit – so they will need to work with other bodies, such as specialist regulators.

- That when the user engages with the statistics, they are told everything they need to know about them, including and especially the weaknesses and limitations of the statistics in relation to their likely uses. So when a senior policeman looks at the police crime statistics for one area of the country against another area (as he is likely to do) he needs to be told up-front that there may be some inconsistency in the

recording of robbery, why that is the case, and how much allowance he should make for that weakness. We can call this **'right explanation'**.

- That the published official statistics and related professional advice are the same as are available inside government. The user must have confidence when they look at police crime statistics that there is not some more meaningful or up-to-date set of statistics that they do not have access to, or some confidential guide only available to insiders as to which statistics are reliable. Or indeed that the user requires some special information simply to find the statistics in the first place. We might call this **'right access'**. This requirement is implied by the others above but it is so important, and so often problematic in practice, that it is worth listing separately.

We could add to this list but that might tend to confuse a reasonably clear picture. If, in the senses defined above, the statistics are the right statistics, prepared by the right methods, accompanied by the right explanation and the user is given the right access, then that is a statistical system worthy of high praise – indeed, any organisation producing statistics which have the characteristics described above might be regarded as a **'right producer'**. And achieving those things in respect of every set of official statistics is a huge challenge without further embellishing the goal.

In the UK case, it is the third and fourth aspects above that are the most problematic – ensuring the right explanation and right access. This has been extensively documented in over 280 published assessment reports⁴ published by the UK Statistics Authority under the provisions of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007. In essence, this work has pointed to a need to shift the balance of professional resources away from simply collecting and publishing data to **'holding the hand'** of the user of statistics – explaining the utility and quality of official statistics and ensuring the fullest possible access to the most relevant statistics. This perhaps points to another central object of trust – that users want to be sure that the resources of the statistical service are being used optimally to support their use of official statistics.

Towards a flexible framework for promoting trust

In this paper, we have sought to draw on the experience of the UK statistical system over the last 20 years to point to the need to move beyond the aspiration to be universally trusted and to start to nail down the **'who'** and the **'what'** of trust in official statistics. We have answered both questions in a way that is tractable and targetable. The **'who'** is the leading opinion-formers, perhaps no more than a couple of hundred people, relatively easy to identify and networked among themselves. The **'what'** is those elements we have defined as right statistics, right methods, right explanation and right access, plus the expectation that the resources of the statistical service will be optimally deployed to achieve those things.

In the UK case, extensive research under the assessment provisions of the statistical legislation has pointed to some weaknesses that require remedial action. Perhaps the first thing that the opinion-formers need to be convinced about is that those weaknesses are understood and are being actively addressed. Once opinion-formers are confident that the

⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

UK's statistical service is on the right path, guided by its independent regulator, then perhaps they will become cheerleaders in public as well as remaining critical friends behind-the-scenes.

Universal trust is a worthy aspiration. However, subscribing to such an aspiration, as we all do, should not be allowed to obstruct a more pragmatic and targeted approach to enhancing trust in targeted aspects of the service among relatively small and targeted groups of opinion-formers.