

The UK Statistics Authority: Voice, brand and behaviour

It's regulation, but not as you know it, says **Ed Humpherson**

Pick up a typical speech by a British politician in 2015. You're likely to find statistics very prominently used: to frame the arguments; to drive home the case; to explain why these policies are both necessary and superior to others. This isn't a phenomenon particular to any one political party. It's common to most political speeches, from the leader of the Opposition and the First Minister of Scotland to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

Nor is this adherence to the use of statistics a phenomenon isolated to the rarified world of political debate. We live in a society that attaches huge importance to numbers, facts and data. As the Data Manifesto of the Royal Statistical Society said in autumn 2014:

'What steam was to the 19th century, and oil has been to the 20th, data is to the 21st. It's the driver of prosperity, the revolutionary resource that is transforming the nature of economic activity, the capability that differentiates successful from unsuccessful societies.'

The enthusiasm for data and statistics led Hal Varian, Google's chief economist, to assert that being a statistician is the sexiest profession of the 21st century. This early 21st century world is the world of ubiquitous data, Open Data, Big Data – all available and waiting for the adept statistician (re-branded, of course, as 'data scientist') to exploit, just like reservoirs of crude oil sitting under the Texas dust at the start of the 20th century.

Into this world, the UK Statistics Authority pitches its work. This article explains the drivers of the Authority's work, and to answer the question as to why, given the very limited tools available to the Authority, we have been able to wield increasing influence.

The Authority was established in 2008 under the Statistics and Registration Service Act, against a backdrop of declining trust in official statistics and a desire for greater independence of

statisticians in Government. We have always enjoyed cross-party political support, particularly through the Public Administration Select Committee, which has held a series of enquiries devoted to ensuring that statistics produced by Government continue to meet the highest standards and maintain their relevance in a changing world.

The Authority's primary statutory objective is to 'promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good'. We deliver this aim through two principal functions. Firstly, through our executive arm, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), we are responsible for overseeing the production of many of the main statistics produced in the UK – for example, the size of the population and the economy, unemployment and prices. But the ONS is not the only producer of statistics – there is a whole range of Government departments producing statistics across the countries of the UK – on health; taxes and benefits; transport; and so on. As a result, the Authority ensures statistics serve the public good through its second function: overseeing statistics across the UK – ensuring the statistics comply with the statutory Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This second role is akin to a regulatory function and is the focus of this article.

Our regulatory function has three main tasks:

- ▶ Assessing statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, leading to designation as a National Statistic
- ▶ Monitoring issues with the quality and use of statistics across the statistical system
- ▶ Public interventions surrounding the use of statistics

This is an intriguing regulatory function by the standards of regulators of business or professional life. We have

only limited tools at our disposal. We cannot fine anyone; we cannot prohibit anyone, either within or outside Government, from producing or using statistics; and we are relatively small, with a budget of around £1.5 million. In effect, all we can do is award or remove the designation of statistics as 'National Statistics'; and express a view publicly about the quality and use of statistics. And yet we do not suffer from a lack of influence. How have we done this? Through a rigorous focus on voice, on brand, and on behaviour change.

Firstly, voice. Our ability to express a view publicly on the use of statistics is powerful. Government departments, politicians and others don't want public criticism from the Authority. The Authority's voice, akin in some

ways to the name-and-shame tool used effectively by regulators in other contexts, seems to be a powerful incentive mechanism. Our voice has led Government departments to strive to improve the rigour with which they handle data and statistics. This was true right from the outset of the Authority in 2008, when our criticisms of how figures on knife crime were used led to changes in the Home Office's approach to data and statistics.

Secondly, brand. The Act gave the Authority the power to confer the status of 'National Statistic' on those statistics that comply fully with the Code of Practice. And from its creation, the Authority did so with real gusto – in a massive programme of assessment, it confirmed the National Statistics status for around 1,000 separate statistical series between 2008 and 2013.

Since we completed this huge endeavour of assessment, we have increasingly focused on National Statistics as a brand, rather than simply starting again to reassess all 1,000 statistics. We are clear that National Statistic status means that the statistics are trustworthy, high quality and valuable. Where they meet these criteria, we celebrate them, through our speeches, presentations, and public letters. Where they do not, we are quick to remove the designation – as we did for example in 2014 for statistics on recording of crime by the police in Eng-

land and Wales. We act promptly and firmly not because we want to weaken trust in statistics. Instead, we want to show the world that the statistics are trustworthy, literally worth trusting, and that we should respond to anything that detracts from that trustworthiness. In the long term, trust is likely to be raised as a result of raising standards, not by sweeping problems under the carpet.

Our third key tool involves being clear on the change in behaviour we want to secure. We focus on two key groups: firstly, the statisticians who produce statistics; and secondly, all those who use them in the public domain.

For the statisticians, the behaviour change we want is to see National Statistics as a system, not isolated, incoherent sets of numbers. The statistics should serve the needs of users; and not just come off a production line. Statisticians are at their best not when they just produce numbers and pump them out, but when they add value, provide insight, paint a picture – explain what the statistics mean.

A good example of this focus was our extensive review of statistics on income and earnings, which was published in February 2015. It highlighted the plethora of different measures of income and earnings, and how this could cause confusion – especially pertinent given the prominence of

debates about living standards in the UK in the run-up to the May 2015 general election. We recommended a much greater focus by statisticians on creating an integrated, coherent overall picture of income and earnings, and making their statistics much more accessible – because coherent and accessible statistics clearly serve the public good.

The second group is those who use statistics in public debate. Statistics are the lifeblood of political communication – a building block of democracy. I have already mentioned the power of voicing our concerns in public. Recognizing this power of voice, we are judicious in the way we use it. We are clear that we don't police all political speech – that would be overweening and undemocratic. Instead, we focus rigorously on the use of statistics in the public domain. We seek to protect the value of official statistics; we want statistics to be cherished and used appropriately.

So in the last year we have written publicly about the use of statistics by the leaders and senior spokespeople of most of the main parties, and others (including in one case voluntary sector organizations); have defended statisticians from political criticism; and have clarified how best to describe issues such as the difference between the annual deficit and the National Debt (a perennial source of confusion, apparently), the extent of zero-hours contracts in the economy, and the comparability of accident and emergency waiting time measures across the UK. All these interventions, and many more, are available on the correspondence page of our website <<http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk>>.

We live in a world that attaches increasing importance to the power of data. From the millenarian cult of Big Data to the typical political speech, data and statistics are seen as a central driver of understanding and change. In this environment, the sober voice of the UK Statistics Authority is essential. We use our voice, our brand and our focus on behaviour to enhance the trust, quality and value of statistics.

Let me close with two final calls to action. If you see concerns about the use of statistics, let us know. But more importantly, if you are using official statistics yourself, use them wisely.

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