

Dorling, D. (2019) “Ministers will still claim, to their dying breath in some cases, that there is no ‘evidence’ linking their actions to the rising numbers of premature deaths in the UK, but eventually they will buckle under the weight of reports showing they are wrong” - Foreword to *Data in Society: Challenging Statistics in an age of globalization*, edited by J. Evans, S. Ruane and H. Southall, Bristol: Policy Press, pp. xv-xvii, <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/data-in-society>

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By Danny Dorling

This is the third book in a long running series, each one (and much else besides) initiated by the Radical Statistics Group. In 1979, the first book, *Demystifying Social Statistics*, revealed how social statistics are constructed and controlled in ways that serve the powerful, and argued that they needed to be contextualised, critiqued and reconstructed. Statistics at that time were most closely associated with the state. Although they were not to know it, the authors of that first volume were writing just before a government would take power that had almost total disregard for the validity of both social data and society itself (‘no such thing as society...’). Famously, the Conservatives changed the official definition of unemployment many times, over and over again, to reduce the headline count, especially after that particular indicator soared above three million. Many government statisticians lost their jobs in the early 1980s due to swingeing cuts to public funding. The same happened again when a Conservative government took power in 2010, aided and abetted by the Liberal Democrats.

The second collection of Radical Statistics essays, published as *Statistics in Society* in 1999, explained how social statistics are rarely collected without an underlying purpose, the importance of how they are assembled and interpreted, and finally how those interpretations were then described – often by the press – as something other than what their authors had originally intended. And it emphasised that what mattered was who was paying for the statistics. It sought to demystify social statistics by including a photograph of every author – rare at that time.

Again, and although they were not to know it, within a few years of the publication of that book the then party of government was involved in determined statistical manipulation. In the run up to the 2001 general election, the Labour Party published ‘*What has Labour done for you in your constituency*’. It turned out that no matter where you lived in the country, or what statistic you clicked on, things had only got better. What the party officials had done was to alter the time range of the statistic, or the geographical area being referenced, to achieve this in all cases. I published a detailed list of all the many forms of manipulation which were undertaken (Dorling et al, 2002). Official statistics had been cleaned up, so now the deception was mainly taking place on political party websites, no longer so often in official statistics.

In the title of this 2019 book, *Data in Society*, the word statistics now appears in the subtitle, *Challenging Statistics in an Age of Globalisation*. In just two decades we now talk of data probably more often than statistics. And we do not know what new forms of deceit await us in a few years’ time, although this volume gives us many clues. In very recent years Cambridge Analytica and a slew of other apparently dark outfits have been involved in everything from encouraging people to vote Leave (having harvested their and their friends’ data), through getting folk to buy even more things they do not want to buy. All this is being done with the collusion of Facebook (2004), Google (1998), Amazon (1994) and other modern-day Behemoths that were not even imaginable in 1979 and barely in existence in 1999. The book you are holding now explains all that, but also that government still frequently misleads, as do many politicians when they use numbers, and that official statistics remain under threat – although they are far better policed and scrutinised today than they ever were before. We have a far more statistically literate population now, both in the UK and world-wide, and the current volume provides a number of examples of the way in which both statisticians and non-statisticians are using statistics for purposes of debunking and counter-information.

So, what will the 2039 volume be about? Many things change but at the heart of the matter, truth and bravery will be most important. Speaking truth to/of power will still require guts, and an understanding of how you can be misled. You can be just as much, if not even more, effectively fooled with numbers as with words. The editors and authors of this volume are to be congratulated for bringing this all together now.

Everything changes, social media is born, data mining becomes an industry, huge and reliable surveys of the population of the global south become available – many for the first time. Those who were not properly counted begin to be included, those who try to evade being enumerated because they don't want to pay tax, are increasingly better and better estimated. The damage caused by austerity is enumerated. Ministers will still claim, to their dying breath in some cases, that there is no 'evidence' linking their actions to the rising numbers of premature deaths in the UK, but eventually they will buckle under the weight of reports showing they are wrong. And progressive politics will also adapt. Statistics, used well, are the weapon of the otherwise unheard, unseen, ignored. There is such a thing as society – the data shows us what it is, how it works, and what happens if, and occasionally when, it falls apart.

Reference

Dorling, D., Eyre, H., Johnston, R. and Pattie, C. (2002) A good place to bury bad news? Hiding the detail in the Geography on the Labour Party's website, Reports and Surveys The Political Quarterly, Vol 73, No.4, p476-492 http://www.dannydorling.org/?page_id=1646