Data 4 Policy: Towards a Data Culture

Walter J. Radermacher

(Department of Statistics, LMU Munich)

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In today's digitised (and globalised) realities and societies, an understanding of data is critical for everyone. Knowledge about data and knowledge from data are equally important for processes and progress in technology, business, administration and science. Last but not least, this knowledge can and should also positively contribute to a public discourse based on existing facts.

As a statistician, one can draw a lot of conclusions from the pandemic crisis, which data was lacking, which indicators were appropriate (or not), etc. Overall, however, the impression is that there is a large gap between what evidence can do for responding to a crisis and what has been actually applied. What is the point of the power of data if we are not able to put it on the road?

In a traditional division of roles, there are those who produce data, facts, indicators, etc. and those who use such results, producers vs. consumers, to put it simply. Today, the situation is a little more complicated. The traditionally divided roles have become mixed, consumers can become producers using widely available data and evaluation tools, everyone is a potential 'prosumer'. In principle, this development is to be welcomed; it opens up diverse opportunities for participation and emancipation. At the same time, however, this development is also accompanied by substantial risks. A proliferation of on-line data and content can lead to mis-use, mis-information, disinformation and distrust in information (and institutions). All too easily, so-called 'alternative facts' are manufactured in the alchemy kitchens of populism to be held up (as equivalent) to scientifically based facts produced with high quality. Only if statistics is understood as a common language can it contribute to the objectification of conflicts. Such a statistical language requires certain standards and it must be sufficiently mastered by all people involved.

As a prerequisite for promoting improved data practices, there needs to be an analysis and understanding of what role data plays in contemporary society. In this context, it is by no means sufficient to devote attention to the technical processes or the economics of data. Likewise, it is not enough to focus the ethical and legal questions on the protection of individual privacy. The task must be

- to understand the process chain of generating knowledge from data under today's conditions with its sub-processes and their characteristic requirements and roles,
- to develop an adequate structure of educational programmes that is geared to the different process stages in this value chain as well as actors, supposed to be competent at a respective stage and level,
- to impart not only the skills but also the competences and values that are required at the respective process level in this data literacy training,
- to offer easy-to-understand, yet solid forms for the communication of facts and figures,
- to review the existing professional ethics of statistics in the light of the new environment
- to actively involve citizens in the design and production of statistics; co-creation and co-production can help to constructively bridge the gap between technically skilled experts in statistics production and the lay public,
- to scientifically process the interrelationship between statistics and the state, between data and society in a sociology of the quantification, supporting trust in numbers and analysing the politics of numbers or 'large' numbers.

Overall, it is about actively promoting a data culture.

Prof. Dr. Walter J. Radermacher

was Director General of Eurostat and Chief Statistician of the European Union from 2008 to 2016. He worked at Destatis, the German Federal Statistical Office, for 30 years, ultimately as its President. He was the first Chair of the UN Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA) from 2005 to 2008 and a member of OECD's High-Level Expert Group on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress from 2013 to 2018. Since 2017 he has been a Researcher at the Department of Statistical Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, and the President of FENStatS, the Federation of European National Statistical Societies, since 2020 a Lecturer in the International Program in Survey and Data Science, Mannheim University. Since 2022 he is Chair of the ISI Advisory Board on Ethics and (honorary) Professor at the Statistical Institute of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich.

Book: Radermacher, Walter J. 2020. Official Statistics 4.0 - Verified Facts for People in the 21st Century (Springer Nature, Heidelberg) https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783030314910