

The Value of Statistics: Progress Report on the ONS-UNECE Task Force

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Statistics delivered free of charge by public sector bodies meet a clear market failure. Whilst the data is valuable to all, it is not in the interests of any one agent to expend the necessary resources to undertake surveys and compile accurate statistics, in either the economic, social, or environmental domains. Often released via the internet in as non-rivalrous and non-excludable a form as possible, these zero price data can be easily characterised as a public good of some value. The pertinent question is how valuable?

This paper will report on the progress of a joint ONS / UNECE Taskforce which has explored the question of measuring the value of public statistics developed by National Statistics Organisations, to inform investment in official statistics. The aim of this work was threefold: to consider what our users meant by ‘value’, to identify ways to measure the value of statistics and find ways to monitor their effectiveness to provide a better service to our customers, and finally to attempt to generate empirical estimates of the market value of such data.

Traditionally, the value of statistics has been measured by looking at key indicators, such as page views and downloads. But these indicators alone do not enable us to measure how useful or impactful people found the statistics. This paper looked at different ways of thinking about ‘value’, considering the various customers of official government-produced statistics, and how ‘value’ differs between individuals. The paper explores determining value by asking users of our statistics what it is that they care about and how they use statistics, and the challenges which previous ‘willingness to pay experiments’ have revealed other methods, such as conjoint analysis are also explored, alongside model surveys.

Following on from this work, the ONS has looked to apply best practice methods to deliver a full appraisal of the value of its statistics. This appraisal considers traditional and novel approaches to measuring the value of statistics, with the aim of using these to triangulate the value, given the limitations inherent in all the available approaches.

We begin with looking at traditional metrics, such as engagements, downloads and time on page and use this to identify our most popular publications. We then identify the users of these data and engage them to understand their needs and uses, asking questions such as what they use the data for, how regularly they would like updates and what they would do or use in the absence of our data. This exercise enables us to segment our user groups and determine the impact of our work on each of them, ultimately providing us with the information required to develop a cost-benefit analysis, include direct, indirect, and social costs and benefits.

We also consider the wider economic impacts of our data by developing a scenario in which the ONS no longer exists and looking at the way the market for data changes as a result and how such a world will impact our existing users and the quality of data available.