

Access To Unpublished Social Science Data in Government Departments in the United Kingdom

by D. A. Clarke¹

Both for the purposes of day-to-day administration and for the formulation of future policy, government departments gather data on a wide range of topics which are potentially valuable for social science research. (Social science is here interpreted very broadly, to include economics and government as well as social studies in the more restricted sense.) A few random examples are agricultural economics and farm profits; consumption of food and drink; public service pay and personnel management; social planning; regional and town planning; population trends; the supply and training of teachers; employment statistics; labour mobility; industrial relations; immigration and race relations; safety, health and welfare; manpower planning; local prisons and penal policy; the police. The records of some other quasi-official bodies, e.g. the research councils and the nationalized industries, must similarly contain data of major value for research.

Though some types of material clearly need to remain closed for a considerable period (e.g. census material and other records of individuals, and data supplied in confidence by business) most of it is not inherently confidential and could be made accessible to *bona fide* researchers long before the expiry of the 30 years after which government records normally become accessible in the Public Record Office (PRO). The problem for the researcher is first to discover what data exists and then to obtain access to it.

In the 1940's and early 1950's the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social and Economic Research (the North Committee) put in hand extensive listings of government material of social science interest (including some unpublished material) held by various departments, which resulted in the publication of a valuable series of six "Guides to Official Sources". The Social Science Research Council, soon after it came into being in 1965, set up a Social Science and Government Committee, which served in a sense as a successor to the North Committee. This latter committee speedily recommended that the North Committee initiative be repeated and the guides brought up to date. The Council therefore awarded a contract to the British Library of Political and Economic Science (at the London School of Economics) to produce a new, single guide to all the unpublished government data likely to be of interest to research workers in the social sciences, and potentially accessible to them, that a small team could locate and list in a limited period. The resulting "Guide to Government Data", published in 1974, reported the material revealed by surveys of 17 departments, carried out over a period of three years from September 1969. It is clearly of the greatest importance that these listings should now be updated, and the remaining departments covered.

Although sheer lack of time necessitated the exclusion of some departments, the absence on

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other grounds of certain key departments is greatly to be regretted; and it is important that their records should now be surveyed. In particular, the Department of Trade and Industry did not find it possible to cooperate in the enterprise; and, though a great deal of material is published by the department, a guide to unpublished material there remains a most important desideratum for economists. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was excluded in view of the confidentiality of much of its unpublished material and the practical difficulty of sorting it; those researching contemporary history will nevertheless find it particularly unfortunate that such materials as press releases could not readily be assembled and made available to serious scholars. The records of the former Department of Scientific and Industrial Research contain a vast fund of valuable data relevant to the social sciences in many fields; but preliminary approaches made it clear that a worthwhile survey was impracticable at that time.

Though problems of personal privacy and commercial confidentiality will probably always prevent access to recent unpublished data in the Office of Population Surveys and H.M. Customs and Excise, the remaining departments should now be included in a new survey. It seems very possible that in some cases the decision that a department could not cooperate in the earlier project may have been affected by traditional department, or even by personal, attitudes towards public access to official documents *per se*; or by the fact that its library was particularly hard pressed at the time of the enquiry: so that a renewed approach to the department might now be favorably received and a proper survey carries out. It is also to be hoped that the official attitude towards public access is becoming more liberal, and that the policy expressed at the time of the former enquiry by the Civil Service Department, namely that it should "make available as much of the material as it reasonably can within the official limits most generously interpreted" is

more widely accepted, so that it will be possible to fund the compilation of a third Guide which would not only update the surveys already published but also reveal important sources of unpublished data held by departments not previously surveyed.

For access to material restricted by the 30-year rule the researcher is normally dependent on the libraries of departments. The amount, type and quality of unpublished material actually made available to a researcher in a library varies considerably from department to department, according to the extent to which it is departmental policy to transfer papers from administrative divisions or branches to its central library. In turn the libraries have varying policies on the admission of researchers, and the extent to which readers, once admitted, are given access to papers, as well as on publication — some departments publish a substantial proportion of the available material.

It may be useful to explain that working papers in a government department are usually held in individual registries attached to the separate divisions or branches which they serve. Although files are reviewed by the department after five years in order to arrange for the destruction of ephemeral material, files containing correspondence and minutes are retained by the department and are not accessible to the public as of right until they are transferred to the PRO after 30 years; and some may be retained by the department after that date on administrative grounds. So if certain information, although not "classified" in the official sense of security classification, is neither readily available in a departmental library open to the public, nor published, nor (as is usual in the case of statistics) provided on payment of a fee to the statistical department concerned, then it generally seems unlikely that under present arrangements members of the public will be able to consult the papers until they have been transferred to the PRO.

It is clear that a substantial proportion of the statistical and other data gathered by government departments is being, or could be, recorded and analysed by automated data processing methods. Both the actual progress made in this area and the scope for further development will no doubt be discussed in the course of this conference. Meanwhile, in 1981 the Committee on Modern Public Records (the Wilson Committee) recommended (para. 423) that "the nucleus of a data archiving centre" should be established as soon as possible; and the Government agreed (Cmnd 8531 para 55) that a feasibility study should be carried out for the establishment of such a centre at the PRO. It is to be hoped that any such centre will work in close cooperation with the Social Science Data Bank of the Economic & Social Research Council.

The advent of data processing techniques should also enable scholars to exploit records more fully and make new connections through the adoption of machine indexing. This should also assist with the hitherto intractable problem of "particular instance papers" (PIPs). These consist of groups of papers, often very numerous indeed, the subject of which is the same in all cases, though each individual paper relates to a different person, body or place. While each individual paper may in isolation be of little importance, when a set of PIPs is taken as a whole and analysed it may form a source from which conclusions as to historical, economic or social trends may be drawn.

In 1979 the appointment of the Wilson Committee provided an opportunity to propose changes which would facilitate the use of government archives by researchers in the social sciences. Some such opportunities which were taken, and others which were missed, are set out below.

In view of the potential importance of data contained in the records of such bodies as the research councils and the nationalized industries,

it was recommended that the PRO should make proposals for consistent arrangements for the selection, preservation and public inspection of the records of the research councils and nationalized industries.

Substantial concern had been expressed to the Committee about the "weeding" of records before they are transferred to the PRO. It was felt that coherent, clearly applicable objectives should be established; and that those carrying out this task needed to have an appreciation of the needs of present and future scholars. It was also suggested that some types of "weeded" material might be transferred for preservation outside government departments (e.g. to universities); and that special note should be taken of the importance for research of the working papers of Royal Commissions and Select Committees and the evidence presented to them. The Committee recommended the adoption of a system of "sector panels", including both departmental interests and researchers with experience of the field in question, to advise departments on the official and wider purposes to which departmental records might be put, so that this advice could be taken into account by the "weeders"; but the Government has rejected this recommendation. The Committee made no reference to the suggestion that some "weeded" material might be preserved outside the relevant department: it was perhaps thought that the organization and exploitation of such deposits might require rather substantial expenditures by the recipient organizations.

The Committee made no reference to the suggestion that the press releases issued by Government departments should be computerized; nor to the concern that has been expressed over the rigid application of the "30-year rule" when material on the same topic is already accessible outside the PRO and when material of a routine nature, but of some historical interest, is automatically restricted under the rule.□

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BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
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Census Offers International Data Base on Diskette

The U.S. Bureau of the Census is now offering its International Data Base (IDB) on diskette for 203 countries of the world. Organized as a series of 94 statistical tables, the IDB contains demographic, economic, and social data for all countries of the world. Each table is fully annotated with information on sources, methods of collection, definitions of terms, methods used in computations, and qualifications of the data.

Each diskette contains tables and notes for a single country. A computer program, written in Basic, is supplied to users to extract individual tables into formats acceptable to software packages such as LOTUS 1-2-3, dDBASE, SUPERCALC, and SPSS[sic]. File documentation describing the contents of the tables and notes is also included. The cost for the first country purchased on diskette, including file documentation, is \$15. The price for each additional country is \$7.50.

The statistical tables from the IDB are also available in printed copy. When ordering printed copies of statistical tables, the first 10 tables are free and additional tables are \$0.25 each.

On-line access to the IDB is available to users within the federal government. Currently, there are 56 organizations within the federal government that have on-line access to the IDB through computer terminals or microcomputers with dial-up capability.

The data contained in the IDB are collected from many sources, including national statistical offices throughout the world, international organizations such as the United Nations, research centres and universities around the world, and federal agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development. Data that originate in host countries usually come from census, vital registration systems, surveys, and administrative records.