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Federal Statistics

Increasingly, all manner of powers and responsibilities have been vested in the federal government. At the same time, the government has come to require of citizens and of private organizations a quality of performance of which the government itself seems incapable. An especially timely example is a differing performance with respect to statistical material. In many instances the latest government statistics are only as recent as 1969. Yet individuals and companies are expected to file accurate income tax returns within a few months following the end of their fiscal year. In some instances government officials merit patience when the sources of basic data are numerous and widespread. However, many of the big corporations carry on comparably complex operations, and they are expected to function expeditiously. Moreover, associations of such companies often issue statistics on a weekly basis.

To collect and analyze the enormous amounts of statistical material it ultimately issues, the government spends very large sums of money. In most cases very few people pay much attention to the data, so no great harm other than an unnecessary tax burden is sustained. There are other instances, however, in which the government's inefficiency affects its own responsibilities or makes it more difficult for other components of society to function as well as they might. A recent example of the latter has been the failure of government to provide current statistics on the number of unemployed scientists and engineers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics is carrying on a study to predict the demand for scientists in 1980, but no one seems to know where we stand today.

Perhaps more serious, since it touches all citizens, is the government's failure to provide timely information on pollution. The latest easily available data are those appearing in the annual report of the Council on Environmental Quality for 1971 issued in August 1971. These data are by no means comprehensive, but they give, for example, information on important air pollutants such as SO₂ and NO_x. The latest figures are for 1969, and we are informed that 1970 figures will not be available until next May. In the meantime, in the absence of data, numerous federal, state, and local actions are being taken.

One of the ironies of the situation is that, as a result of federal and local action, progress is being made in abating pollution. Why keep it a secret?

A tough-minded approach to government statistics seems called for. What is the value of accurate information in fast-changing fields when the figures are years out of date? The government is able to furnish in a timely fashion a few important indexes. Why can it not move faster in other fields?

One of the important lessons of recent years is that fairly accurate information can be quickly obtained by using sampling techniques such as the opinion polls. Why not apply such techniques to obtaining unemployment data or for predicting future job opportunities?

Today many of the data on various pollutants are collected by electronic sensors. Why not feed these data into a central electronic processor and have printouts on demand?

The present pace at which government statistics are assembled is appropriate to the days of the pony express, the quill pen, and laborious arithmetic. Time is overdue for the government to begin to move with the late 20th century and to produce the kind of current information that it demands of others.—PHILIP H. ABELSON