

Ten Years of the Journal of Official Statistics

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The tenth anniversary of the *Journal of Official Statistics* (JOS) is worthy of celebration; it also may be an occasion for review and reflection. One obvious place to begin any review might be in terms of how well the Journal has achieved its originally intended purposes. This will be my main approach here; but there is also a short discussion of the goals themselves and how they might be renewed or refined.

The “Editorial Statement” that opens the initial issue of JOS states

We have the ambition to make the *Journal of Official Statistics* an internationally recognized communication medium on methodology and policy matters facing national statistical offices and other producers of statistics.

What an enormous undertaking! And largely, if not uniformly, a successful one. Think back, for a moment, to the energy and determination it must have taken to commit to such a hard-to-achieve goal. After all, in 1985 there were already many excellent statistical journals published in English, full of fine methodological papers – ranging from those with a general focus (like the *International Statistical Review* and the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*) to still others, including some like *Survey Methodology* (published in French and English) that were, as is JOS, being printed by a national statistical office.

What were the ingredients for the success of JOS? Some surmised reasons are listed below – a list that is hardly meant to be all-inclusive:

- The proven skill and self-confidence of a well-trained core of individuals at Statistics Sweden. This grew, no doubt, in part from the experiences gained in publishing Statistics Sweden’s earlier journal, *Statistisk tidskrift*, which JOS replaced.
- The focus on being an international communication medium was another key to establishing a niche for the Journal. While new research on methodology was welcomed, the emphasis from the beginning was on contributions that constituted “an interesting application of a method, a comparative study of different methods, an authoritative exposition of methods within a certain field, or a discussion of policy issues.” In keeping with the goal to be a communication medium, readability has been the hallmark of the journal, with “excessive mathematics avoided.”
- A proactive approach to submissions. Many journals are passive in their submission policy. “We only can publish what we receive,” is sometimes said. This

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clearly has not been the approach of JOS. On the contrary, there seems to have been, from the beginning, an aggressive outreach that sought the work of the key people in our field, on both the methodology and policy sides. The initial issue of JOS, for example, began with papers by Dalenius, Kish, and Särndal (among others).

- The concentration on National Statistical Offices. While the language in the “editorial statement” is inclusive, JOS has primarily emphasized themes that are important to national statistical offices – as distinct from “other producers of statistics”. This has been true not only in the methodologies presented; but also in the business concerns addressed. The focus of JOS on national statistical offices has perhaps defined the journal’s outreach and undoubtedly its core readership. A natural contrast would be the superb journal, *Statistical Science*, started almost at the same time. *Statistical Science* has many of the same communication goals as JOS – but a very general orientation and more academically-centered following. (Incidentally, the use of the interview format, as in *Statistical Science*, is something that JOS might want to consider for some of its submissions.)
- Finally, the nature of JOS editorship. In the tradition of *Biometrika* and some other, but not many other, statistical journals, JOS has had a single, unified, long-term editorship (with an outstanding group of international scholars and practitioners acting as Deputy and Associate Editors). Indeed, there has only been one Chief Editor, Lars Lyberg. His personality and breadth of vision have been crucial, in Deming’s phrase, to the “constancy of purpose” that has made JOS what it is. Leadership matters!

In the Journal’s initial editorial statement, a long list of examples is given of “suitable topics” for submissions. Broadly, these were grouped into:

- Aspects of census and survey methodology (e.g., sampling theory, nonsampling errors, and data gathering techniques). JOS has certainly improved international accessibility to a wide range of census and survey techniques. There have been special issues on questionnaire design (1985), population censuses (1986), non-sampling errors (1987), telephone surveys (1988), and two issues (in 1992) on measurement errors in surveys. The use of survey weights (e.g., Little 1991) and variance estimation (e.g., Kalton and Rust 1987; Judkins 1990) are among a long list of other topics in this area, presented to be of immediate use to practitioners. (This is an area that has and should remain central to JOS.)
- Other general methodological issues in national statistical offices (e.g., comparability problems, standard classifications). This area has received less emphasis and the results achieved have been more uneven. Perhaps the need was not as great, since many of these topics in official statistics are also covered by economic and other speciality journals. The entire issue on environmental statistics (1988) and the major Cleveland et al. paper (1990) were among the welcome attempts at achieving a wider balance. (The practice of keeping such submissions infrequent is, though, wise and should continue.)
- Policy or business matters (like training and recruitment of statisticians but also

ethics and privacy concerns). JOS has outdone itself here. Frankly, it is hard to imagine that many of the papers published in this area would even have been written, except for the encouragement of Lyberg and his editorial staff. A whole issue (in 1993) has been devoted to statistical agency practices around the world, but there were many forerunner pieces in the years prior to that (usually appearing in the *Miscellanea* or *Special Notes* portion of JOS). Privacy and, especially, confidentiality have been well covered too – notably by the special issue (in 1993) but with many other papers before and since (e.g., Fienberg 1994). In a related area, the Jowell article (1986) on “The Codification of Statistical Ethics” was very important – in fact, a topic certainly worthwhile revisiting and updating periodically.

- The role of national statistical offices in the societies they serve. A distinct contribution has been made in the few submissions in this area. One notable example is the paper by Ivan Fellegi (1988). The themes in Kelman (1985) and Johansson (1990) resonate too. A little more on the history of national statistical office relationships with their societies would be good. In this category already are the Hofsten piece (1988) and even, it might be argued, the Mu Zhu paper (1987) on “The Earliest Statistical Tables in China”. (Something directly focussed on the role national statistical offices worldwide are playing in improving quantitative literacy would be a welcome addition too.)

The initial intent of JOS in its selection of papers was to “form a wide spectrum, typical of the situation of official statistics.” Well, how have things turned out so far? In my judgement, with some minor exceptions (mainly noted above), extremely well indeed. The practice of publishing edited conference proceedings as special issues, however, is worth an additional comment. Frankly I like a whole issue devoted to a single topic, as long as this is infrequent – say, once a year or so (as basically has been the practice). Publishing such papers with discussion, as in the 1993 special issue on confidentiality, should be continued; it helps even out the inevitable variability in communication styles and gives the reader a means of weighing the importance and scholarly depth of alternative views.

Enough on the past of JOS. What is it the prologue to? Or better yet, what should it be the prologue to? An obvious answer is, of course, more of the same. In particular,

- Continuing JOS’s closeness to the (new quickly) evolving technologies, professional needs and interests of official statisticians.
- Strengthening further the personal outreach that JOS has made to those in our business who have something to share and then helping them share it.
- Connecting us all together, not only through what JOS publishes but by reminding JOS readers of important developments published elsewhere.

Another answer is to venture forth into new endeavours. Two examples are given below that may suggest some of what I have in mind:

- Electronic publishing, using the Internet or CD-ROM, would be a possibility to look at. The *Journal of the American Statistical Association* (JASA) is now moving

in this direction and other statistical publications (e.g., the *IMS Bulletin*) have already begun.

- Bringing together reprints of the important advances in one or more of the sub-fields of interest to national statistical offices could be yet another potential new endeavor. What about a joint undertaking with, say, *Survey Methodology* (and maybe other journals) to collect into a book the recent work on variance estimation published since the seminal treatment by Kirk Wolter (1985)?

In keeping with the profession's renewed interest on continuous improvement (e.g., Box 1992), some process observations about the journal's future management might be appropriate. In particular, consider –

- Conducting a formal quality benchmarking effort with other statistical and non-statistical journals (to look for the best of the best).
- Routinely carrying out customer surveys of actual and potential JOS readers, actual and potential submitters of JOS articles and so forth. The publications of the American Society for Quality Control (e.g., *Quality Progress*) conduct such surveys already and might be a partial model.
- Exploring through a citation study (a la Stigler 1994) what the journal's penetration (cross-citation) rate is in general (JASA?) and parallel (*Survey Methodology*?) journals.
- Tracing the multiple (?) readership of the journal to see what its presence is in the life of national statistical offices. This, of course, might not be doable but some case studies could be instructive.
- Of even more importance, is there a way to measure what difference JOS makes in the short and long-run activities of national statistical offices? Does JOS change practice directly or is it mainly a way to help educate young staff? Etc.?

In closing let me add a few personal notes: First, as the former head of a national statistical organization in the U.S., I always found JOS of great value. Despite many time pressures, each issue had something of use that made it worth my while to read (rather than set aside for later). Second, now that I have taken up a university life, JOS should continue to prove important, both in my teaching and in my consulting practice. Finally, what a treat it was for me, as part of this review, to revisit JOS over its ten-year life. If anything, JOS reads better as a time series than it has in cross-section. Thank you and congratulations!

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