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Topic (i): Reputation management for target audiences

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT FOR TARGET AUDIENCES

Some Recent Attacks on the Census Bureau

Invited Paper

Submitted by United States Census Bureau¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Modern societies need quality data for planners and policymakers to manage complex and rapidly changing economic and social processes. The mission of the United States Census Bureau is to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy. The Census Bureau honors privacy, protects confidentiality, shares its expertise globally, and conducts its work openly. The Census Bureau is guided in this mission by its strong and capable workforce, its readiness to innovate, and its abiding commitment to its customers.²

2. Quality data is needed to provide policymakers, businesses, non-profit organizations and the public with current measures of the U.S. population, economy, and governments.³ For this paper, Census Bureau customers are more broadly divided into three categories: funders, data users and respondents. The primary funder of the Census Bureau is the U.S. Congress, although substantial funding is also received from reimbursable contracts with other governmental agencies. Data users are typically identified broadly as federal, state, local and tribal governments; industries and businesses; researchers and educators; the media; and national, state, local and community non-governmental organizations. Data respondents are the individuals, households and businesses who participate in censuses and surveys by providing personal information on questionnaires or in interviews.

3. Reputation management is an important issue for the Census Bureau, as it is for all national statistical agencies. The customers, and the trusted agents and influencers of these customers, to include politicians, advocates, and the media, increasingly question the data collected, processed and disseminated by national statistical agencies. Such challenges can lead to an erosion of confidence in the data, and the institution that produces them.

¹ Prepared by Kenneth C. Meyer, Chief, Public Information Office, <kenneth.c.meyer@census.gov>, revised February 9, 2005.

² U.S. Census Bureau. *Strategic Plan FY 2004-2008*, Census Bureau Mission, July 2002, p.1.

³ *Ibid*, Strategic Goal 1, p.3.

4. A good reputation is critical to public confidence. The erosion of confidence by funders, data users and respondents has the potential for dire consequences. The erosion of respondent confidence leads to increased non-response. Increased non-response negatively impacts data quality, which in turn has a deleterious effect on the agency's reputation with its funders and the data user community.

II. RECENT ATTACKS ON THE REPUTATION OF THE CENSUS BUREAU

5. There are two notable incidents of recent challenges to the reputation of the Census Bureau: data mining to profile airline passengers and requests for census data on Arab-Americans. Both of these incidents are described briefly, but the detail focuses on the requests for special tabulations of Arab-Americans. The negative backlash resulting from the Arab-American data request, the actions taken by the communications directorate to counter this backlash, and the proactive steps that have been put into place to prevent, or at least minimize, such attacks in the future are chronicled. Since media stories are often our first indication of an impending attack on our reputation, the communications directorate has plans to reach out to print and broadcast reporters and editors with positive messages about the programs and products of the Census Bureau, and its commitment to the privacy and confidentiality of respondent information. In this way, we hope to generate positive news and feature stories that will mitigate fallout from future incidents, and help us better maintain the good reputation of the Census Bureau with all its target audiences.

6. DATA MINING TO PROFILE AIRLINE PASSENGERS:

In January 2004, a story appeared in *The Washington Times* alleging that the Census Bureau provided person and household information to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) for a study of how domestic airline passengers could be screened and profiled based on the possible risk of their committing acts of terrorism.⁴ This passenger-screening study was designed for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to replace the existing system of watch lists and security triggers (such as buying a one-way ticket with cash), with a system that attempts to verify the identity of every domestic airline passenger by data-mining private commercial and government databases, including Census Bureau data. In this context, data mining is defined as the application of database technology and statistical techniques to detect patterns and relationships in data that allow the inference of rules for predicting future results.⁵ After *The Washington Times* story broke, we contacted the staff reporter and informed her that the statement about the use of Census Bureau data in the NASA study was incorrect and misleading.⁶ We advised her that the Census Bureau data used in the study was in fact from public files posted on our Internet site, and could be easily located on that site. We then conducted a virtual tour of the PUMS (Public Use Microdata Sample) data on our web site with her, including information about how this aggregate public data undergoes rigorous scientific testing to establish and maintain the highest degree of privacy and confidentiality for individual respondents. Upon learning that the reporter was planning to interview Homeland Security personnel for a follow-up story, we recommended that she include a correction saying that the U.S. Census Bureau did not, and will not, release person-identifiable information from respondents to any other organization, public or private. *The Washington Times* follow-up story ran about a week later, and included our recommendation correction. Media stories on the NASA study have not repeated the incorrect characterization of the Census Bureau public microdata.

⁴ Audrey Hudson, "Study Used Census Information for Terror Profile," *The Washington Times*, January 19, 2004.

⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office. "Data Mining: Federal Efforts Cover a Wide Range of Uses," GAO-04-548, May 2004, p. 1.

⁶ The reporter from *The Washington Times* had not contacted the Census Bureau get our version or even fact-check before she ran her story.

7. REQUEST FOR DATA ON ARAB-AMERICANS:

On June 30, 2004, a story in *The New York Times* raised questions about the Census Bureau's handling of respondent personal information, especially data from race/ethnic minorities and other sensitive population groups.⁷ At the request of the DHS Customs & Border Protection agency, Census Bureau staff prepared collapsed extracts and tabulations for Census 2000 ancestry data for places of more than 10,000 with more than 1,000 Arab-American, and Arab-American populations by Zip-Code Tabulation Area. These data were publicly available from the Summary File 1 posted on the Census Bureau public Internet site. DHS staff could have gathered them directly from this site. The details surrounding this DHS request, and the subsequent attack on the reputation of the Census Bureau, are discussed later in this paper.

8. These two events clearly relate to the general topic of privacy and confidentiality. Privacy and confidentiality are inter-related issues, and are of critical concern to Census Bureau target audiences – funders, data users, and respondents. These issues are not going to go away. Given the incidents that have occurred in the past year, the Census Bureau must be prepared to respond appropriately to attacks on the reputation of the Census Bureau and the data collected and disseminated, and to plan proactively for the eventuality of such attacks.

III. THE ARAB-AMERICAN INCIDENT IN DEPTH

9. In the spring of 2004, an advocacy group, the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), filed a FOIA request to obtain information about the reformatting of extracts, by the U.S. Census Bureau to the DHS, of Census 2000 data pertaining to a specific group of Census Bureau respondents – Arab-Americans. Research by Census Bureau staff indicated that two tabulations on Arab-American population were produced in response to requests from the DHS Customs and Border Protection agency.⁸ The first tabulation, provided in August 2002, listed all places in the United States with more than 10,000 population that also had more than 1,000 persons of Arab ancestry. The second tabulation, provided, in December 2003, was ZIP-code level data of persons of Arab ancestry, sorted by country of origin, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Syria. On July 30, 2004, *The New York Times* published an article on the FOIA documents that the Census Bureau provided to EPIC about these two special tabulations.⁹ This article was republished in newspapers, wire services, and other news organizations. In fact, a Google News search on “Census Bureau and Department of Homeland Security and Arab American” conducted by EPIC from July 29, 2004 to July 31, 2004 returned results from 24 other sources.¹⁰ Following this flurry of media activity,

⁷ Lynette Clemetson, “Homeland Security Given Data on Arab-Americans,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2004, p. A10, cols. 1-3.

⁸ These tabulations were extracts produced by reformatting data already available in public files and products. Although any data user could potentially create such data extracts from public Census 2000 data files, Census Bureau staff routinely assists data users, including other federal agencies, by providing such extracts.

⁹ Lynette Clemetson, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ *Arab Americans Decry Census Data Collection*, NPR (audio) 19 hours ago; *Arab Americans Decry Census Data Collection*, NPR (audio) 20 hours ago; *Arab-American Info Given to Homeland Security: Report*, Islam Online, UK – Jul 30, 2004; *US Homeland Security Gets Data on Arab-Americans*, Aljazeera.info – Jul 31, 2004; “*US Homeland Security Gets Data on Arab-Americans*,” Arab News, Saudi Arabia – Jul 31, 2004; *Report: Homeland Security Gets Data on Arab-Americans*, Muslim American Security, VA – Jul 30, 2004; *Census unit offers data on Arabs for security*, International Herald Tribune, France – Jul 30, 2004; *Census breakdown of US Arabs assailed*, Omaha World Herald, NE – Jul 31, 2004; *Homeland Security Given Data on Arab-Americans*, Spartanberg Herald Journal, SC – Jul 30, 2004; *Homeland Security Given Data on Arab-Americans*, Sarasota Herald-Tribune, FL – Jul 30, 2004; *Outraged: Census Bureau Gives out Data on Arab-Americans to ...* Pakistan News Service, Pakistan – Jul 30, 2004; *US Arabs express concern over use of census figures*, Taipei Times, Taiwan – Jul 30, 2004; *Census gives Arab data to Homeland Security*, Houston Chronicle, TX – Jul 29, 2004; *US census bureau watching Arab-Americans*, Big News Network.com, Australia – Jul 30, 2004; *Population statistics on US Arabs compiled*, Fort Worth Star Telegram, TX – Jul 31, 2004; *Homeland Security Given Data on Arab-Americans*, AZ Central.com, AZ – Jul 30, 2004; *Homeland Security*

complaints from advocates for Arab-Americans and other minorities, especially Hispanic Americans, began to appear in newspaper articles and op-ed pieces nationwide. Among the complaints that appeared was the perception that these requests were similar to the statistical information provided by the Census Bureau to the U.S. War Department in the 1940's which resulted in more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans being put into internment camps during World War II.

10. The Census Bureau Public Information Office used the following communications countermeasures to deal with this special tabulation issue:

- ?? Notified the director, the executive staff, our Detroit regional office (where there is a very large Arab-American population, and where many of the most outspoken Arab-American advocates reside), and key members of the Census Bureau Advisory Committees¹¹.
- ?? Held brainstorming sessions with the director, executive staff, communications directorate, and formed a privacy strategy group and a rapid response communications team.
- ?? On August 5, drafted a preliminary *Response to Query: Requests for Census Bureau Extracts and Special Tabulations* for internal use by staff that handled media calls.
- ?? Developed a communications plan, including a threat matrix, key messages and talking points, and conducted media training for senior Census Bureau spokespersons.
- ?? On August 26, the Census Bureau director signed and disseminated an internal document requiring prior approval by the appropriate Associate Director for all special data tabulations where the request is made by a law enforcement or intelligence agency, and/or where the request involves a sensitive population as defined in the regulations for the protection of human subjects in research.
- ?? On August 26 we sent a copy of the new policy to the *The Detroit News*, which has a circulation in an area of Michigan with a large Arab-American population, and pitched the revised procedures as representative of how seriously the Census Bureau is about maintaining the highest public trust and integrity and maintaining maximum respondent privacy in accordance with the law. Also arranged for an exclusive interview for *The Detroit News* with the director.
- ?? On August 30, we sent out a news release, "U.S. Census Bureau Announces Policy Regarding Sensitive Data," to our media database for immediate release.

11. *The Detroit News* ran a story on Monday, August 30, and included favorable responses from advocacy groups and community leaders, particularly those representing the Arab-American populations.¹² On the same day, *The New York Times* interviewed the Census Bureau director, and ran

Given Data on Arab-Americans, The Ledger, FL – Jul 30, 2004; *Arab-American data analyzed by ZIP code*, Atlanta Journal Constitution, GA – Jul 29, 2004; *Report: Homeland Security Gets Data on Arab-Americans*, Muslim American Security, VA – Jul 30, 2004; *Report: Homeland Security Gets Data on Arab-Americans*, Wired News – Jul 30, 2004; *Census bureau sharing information on Arab Americans*, Seattle Post Intelligencer, WA – Jul 30, 2004; *Kerry's Deficit Cutting May Not Add Up*, [... The Census Bureau has provided specially tabulated statistics on Arab-Americans to the Department of Homeland Security, including ...], Cato Institute – Jul 30, 2004; *Census Bureau Tracking Arab-Americans for US Government*, The Scotsman, UK – Jul 30, 2004; and *US census bureau watching Arab-Americans*, Washington Times, DC – Jul 30, 2004.

¹¹ Decennial Census Advisory Committee; Race and Ethnic Advisory Committees (African-American; Hispanic; Asian; American Indian and Alaska Native; and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders); Advisory Committee of Professional Associations (American Economic Association, American Marketing Association, American Statistical Association, and Population Association of America).

¹² Brad Heath, "Census Tightens Release Of Data," *The Detroit News*, August 30, 2004.

a similarly positive story the next day.¹³ National and international print and broadcast media fed off the Detroit News and New York Times stories. In the span of a month the negative media and public outcry had been significantly reduced to near containment.

12. Proactive work with the media helps gauge the concerns of stakeholder advocates and the constituents they represent. This work is critical to getting out positive messages that enhance our reputation with respondents and the trusted agents who advocate on their behalf. In addition to the reactive measures listed above, the Census Bureau communications directorate developed the following strategic countermeasures to deal with this special tabulation incident:

- ?? Arranged teleconferences with the Arab-American Institute, Census Bureau Advisory Committee members and other minority group advocates and representatives, reassuring them that the Census Bureau did not, and will not, release person-identifiable information from respondents to any other organization, public or private.
- ?? During mid-September 2004, worked with the director's office to plan a three-day, open-to-media, formal meeting of the joint Census Bureau Advisory Committees to discuss the new special tabulations request procedures, and to address the concerns of the committee members. The Decennial Census Advisory Committee, the Census Bureau's Race and Ethnic Advisory Committees, and the facilitators for the Census Advisory Committee of Professional Associations, met at the Census Bureau on November 9, 2004. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss with Census Bureau officials the issues surrounding the sharing of Arab-American data with the Department of Homeland Security. At the meeting the passion with which members of the Race and Ethnic Advisory Committees expressed their concerns re-enforced the seriousness of this incident, and underlined the need to work hard to 'mend fences' with our minority target audiences
- ?? In December 2004, we learned that D.V. Flores, Vice Chair of the Decennial Census Advisory Committee, was invited to be a guest on the Kojo Nnamdi radio show (WAMU, 88.5) to discuss issues related to the release of Arab-American census data to DHS. When we found out about this show, we arranged for Nancy Gordon, Census Bureau Associate Director for Demographic Programs, to appear as an additional guest on the show. The result was a more balanced and positive show that helped to diffuse rather than exacerbate this controversy.
- ?? Drafted a News Release announcing the appointment of a Census Bureau Chief Privacy Officer (CPO) to supplement the privacy and confidentiality research of the Census Bureau Policy Office.

IV. CONCLUSION

13. The two incidents discussed in this paper summarize attacks in 2004 on the reputation of the Census Bureau involving the critical issue of the privacy and confidentiality of respondent information. A good reputation is critical to public confidence. The erosion of respondent confidence leads to increased non-response. Increased non-response negatively impacts data quality, which in turn has a negative effect on the agency's reputation with its appropriators and the data user community.

14. Since media stories are often our first indication of an impending challenge to our reputation, the communications directorate plans to continue to closely monitor Census Bureau stories through

¹³ Lynette Clemetson, "Census Policy On Providing Sensitive Data Is Revised," *The New York Times*, August 31, 2004, p. A12, col. 1.

clips searches and ongoing relationships with print and broadcast reporters and editors. Once an incident is identified, appropriate Census Bureau staff is notified and a rapid response team is identified. A communications plan is developed, including a threat matrix, key messages and talking points. When necessary, media training is conducted for public affairs specialists and official Census Bureau spokespersons. Response to Query (RTQ) and Question & Answer (Q&A) documents are prepared and used to brief Census Bureau staff and key stakeholders. Telephone calls are made to key media to pitch the RTQ points and ask for a subsequent story to be written or broadcast. The key is to develop and present reporters and editors with positive messages about the programs and products of the Census Bureau, and its commitment to the privacy and confidentiality of respondent information.

15. In the two incidents presented here, the Census Bureau has taken some general proactive actions to better manage its reputation. Plans are being developed to continue outreach to print and broadcast reporters and editors through 'Brown Bag' working lunches and media conference workshops. Ongoing refresher media training is being planned for all public affairs specialists, subject area specialists, and Census Bureau spokespersons. Finally, the Census Bureau Public Information Office and Policy Office have agreed to develop an external and internal communications plan covering the extensive research currently underway on issues of privacy and confidentiality.

16. In conclusion, to be successful in its mission, the Census Bureau must continue to rely on the American people to provide their personal information in total confidence believing that it will not be revealed. Minority community advocates must especially be assured of this, so they will continue to encourage reluctant minority constituents to respond to Census Bureau questionnaires. As noted elsewhere, privacy and confidentiality issues are not expected to go away -- this issue is like a sleeping dog that can awake start barking at any time. National statistical agencies must be prepared to respond appropriately to attacks on the reputation of their institution and the data collected and disseminated, and to plan proactively for the eventuality of such attacks.