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Maintaining Credibility in an Increasingly Skeptical World

Michael Levi, Morgan Earp, Daniell Toth (Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States)

Maintaining the credibility of our published data is not only a core value of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), but it is also essential to accomplishing our mission. Few data users are in a position to verify the completeness and accuracy of statistical information. They must, therefore, rely on an agency's reputation. If data users and potential data users do not trust that BLS data are accurate and free from political or other undue influence, then they will stop using our products to make informed decisions. That would, in effect, make our work pointless.

Furthermore, survey respondents must be able to trust that the information they provide to a statistical agency will be used effectively and only for the purposes that the agency has described. If businesses and households do not trust BLS, they will be less likely to respond to our surveys. That would, in effect, make our work impossible.

On the whole, we believe that BLS data are widely viewed as the gold standard for measures of the U.S. labor market, working conditions, price changes, and productivity. Of course there are commenters who raise questions about statistical concepts, definitions, and methodologies. This is completely appropriate. BLS welcomes informed discussions concerning improvements we could make that would increase the relevance and reliability of our estimates.

The economic landscape changes over time, as does the technology we have at our disposal. Both require that BLS update our thinking and our processes to keep current. This is why, among other things, BLS has standing consultative bodies (in particular, the BLS Technical Advisory Committee and Data Users Advisory Committee) to help us review and enhance ongoing operations and develop new initiatives. These constructive conversations make our work better.

Of great concern, however, is our perception that public discourse has become increasingly contentious of late, and that BLS, like other statistical and non-statistical organizations, has become a target for vitriol that could undermine data users' confidence in the estimates we publish.

In order to assess the validity of this concern, several colleagues at BLS and the U.S. Census Bureau[1] are carrying out a survey to measure and monitor public trust in the U.S. federal statistical system (hereafter referred to as the "FSS Trust Survey.") Since 2012, the Gallup polling organization has collected data daily using a random digit dialing telephone survey of adults age 18 and over. The response rate has been 11 percent.

The two FSS Trust Survey prompts of relevance to this paper are:

1. Personally, how much trust do you have in the Federal statistics in the United States? Would you say that you tend to trust Federal statistics or tend not to trust them?
2. People can trust Federal statistical agencies to keep information about them confidential.

Looking at data over a span of 2 years, from February 2012 through March 2014, yields instructive information about national levels of trust in federal statistical agencies and their products. This time period is of particular interest because a number of government-related potential shocks occurred that might be expected to have an effect on public trust.

The first was a tweet by the well-known former CEO of a major corporation, who suggested that a drop in the unemployment rate reported just prior to the 2012 presidential election was manipulated by the incumbent administration:

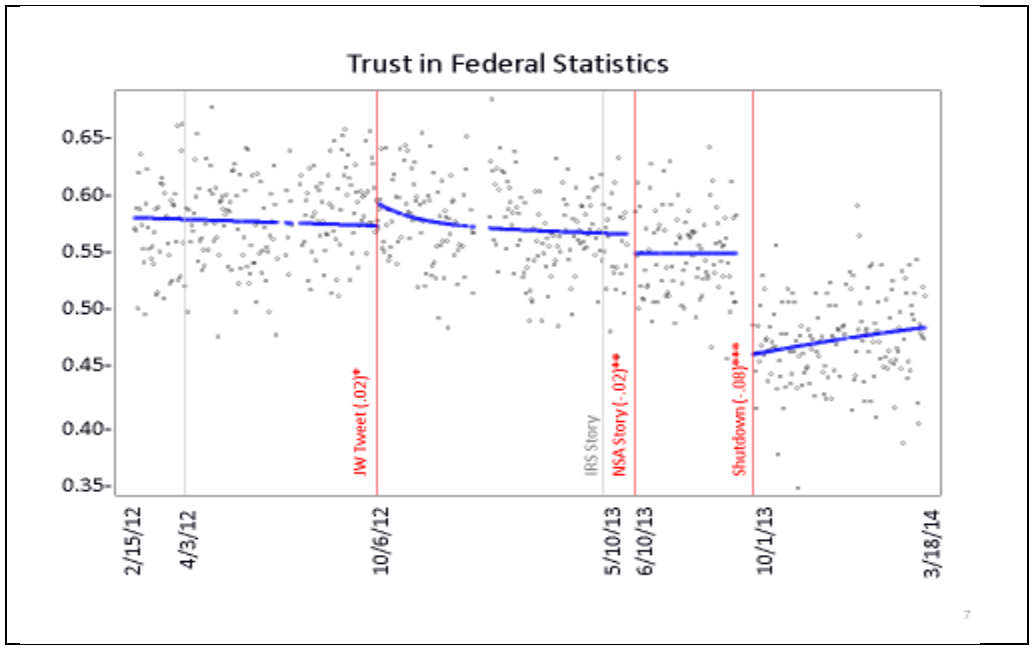
The second was the widely publicized allegation that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS, the U.S. federal tax collection agency) had selected certain not-for-profit groups for intensive scrutiny based on their perceived ideological leanings.

The third was the revelation that the National Security Agency (NSA) had engaged in widespread secret surveillance of U.S. citizens within the United States.

The final potential shock occurred when the U.S. federal government was shut down for 16 days in October 2013 after the two chambers of Congress failed to agree on a budget.

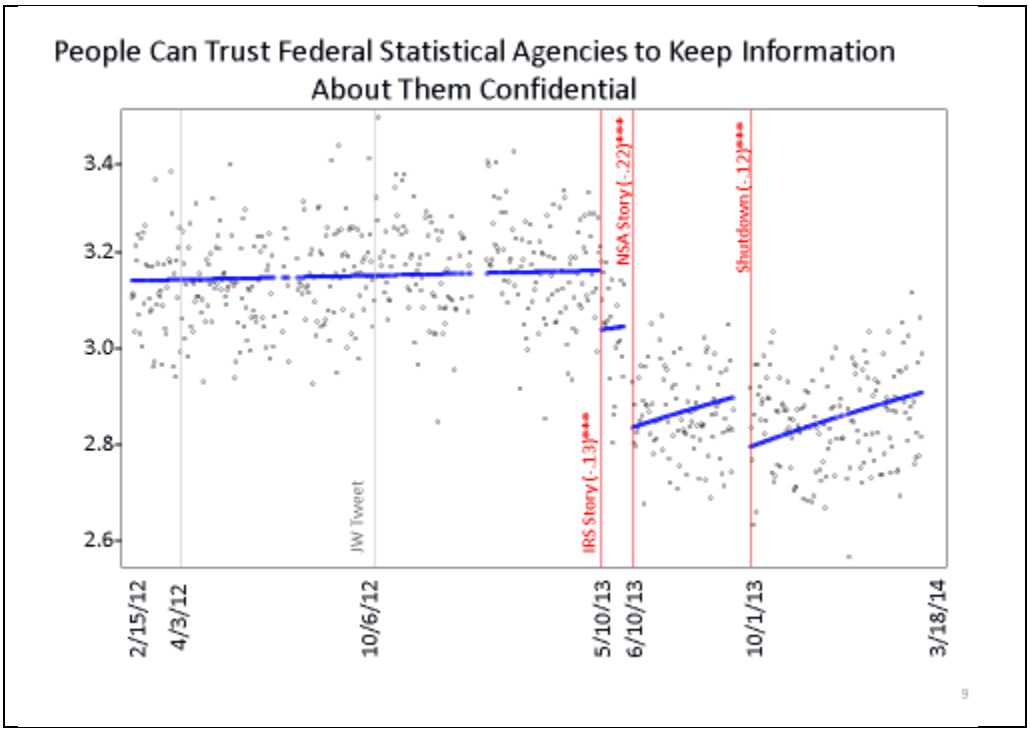
[1] Childs, J.H., King, R., Toth, D., & Earp, M. (2014). Potential Effects of Government Shutdown on the Federal Statistical System. American Association for Public Opinion Research. Anaheim, CA.

The Jack Welch tweet was a direct attack on the integrity of BLS data. The IRS and NSA stories described potential malfeasance in two non-statistical government agencies. And the Federal shutdown had little or nothing to do with the reliability or honesty of any specific agency but called the value of the entire Federal government into question.



(Childs, King, Toth, & Earp; AAPOR, 2014)

Looking at FSS Trust Survey findings, the Jack Welch tweet resulted in a slight rise in FSS Trust Survey respondents' reported trust in Federal data (possibly due to many respected commenters coming to the defense of BLS). The IRS story had no noticeable impact. The NSA story resulted in a slight fall in reported trust. But the government shutdown brought about a precipitous drop in trust.



(Childs, King, Toth, & Earp; AAPOR, 2014)

The Jack Welch tweet also had no significant effects on FSS Trust Survey respondents' faith that statistical agencies protect their personal information, but the IRS story, the NSA story, and the government shutdown all resulted in notable drops in levels of trust.

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It is hard to draw actionable conclusions from the FSS Trust Survey results. The direct attack on a statistical product shows either no change in public trust or, paradoxically, a rise in trust. The real damage to trust appears to result from events that are essentially unrelated to BLS or even other statistical agencies.

Our interpretation of the events and findings is that third-party validation, of BLS in particular and the federal statistical system in general, helped mitigate the potential harm of the Jack Welch tweet. Thus, BLS is addressing the one circumstance we might be able to influence by redoubling our efforts to provide as much useful data, and as much useful background information on our methods and procedures, as we can to our key stakeholders and the general public. As we saw with the Jack Welch tweet response, these trusted voices help bolster our credibility and silence our critics.

Our emphasis is on transparency: to give users the information they need to assess the impartiality, accuracy, timeliness, and suitability of our data for their purposes. We focus on three primary areas: a release calendar published well in advance of publication dates, widespread notification of errors, and clear explanatory materials.

A key component of this transparency is to provide methodological material at a level that can be understood by non-specialist audiences. Our goal is to have clear methodological material readily available on our website so that interested users can find relevant explanations themselves, but also so that we can point people with questions to responsive documents as soon as controversies arise. This allows BLS information specialists to respond quickly and helpfully, and reduces the likelihood that we will be perceived as reacting defensively.

One way BLS works to deflect accusations of choosing publication dates to bolster (or undermine) any specific policy is to announce our release schedule well in advance. The full 2015 release calendar, for example, was posted to the BLS website in October 2014.

On the very rare occasion when a release cannot meet its announced date, BLS takes the initiative to notify data users through a broad array of channels: a prominent notice on the website home page and other relevant web pages, e-mail to relevant subscription lists, an announcement on Twitter, and often through direct personal communication with key stakeholders.

Similarly, on the infrequent occasions when BLS becomes aware of errors in published products, we proactively notify data users through the same array of channels: notices on prominent website pages, email to relevant subscription lists, an announcement through Twitter, and direct personal communication with key stakeholders. Corrections to published data are also footnoted in our public database and listed on a comprehensive historical errata page which describes the error, the data impacted, the date that corrections were published, and gives contact information so users can follow up if they have further questions.

To inform users about information quality and methodology, BLS provides descriptions of the methods and procedures used to develop and produce our statistical products. These descriptions are prepared at various levels of complexity and comprehensiveness to address the wide range of user needs. Summary level technical notes are typically included with each news release. Programs post a variety of frequently asked questions and technical updates on the BLS website, and often publish methodological research and announce methodological changes in BLS publications such as the *Monthly Labor Review* and *Beyond the Numbers*.

The BLS *Handbook of Methods* presents detailed explanations of how BLS obtains and prepares the economic data it publishes. Chapters for each major BLS program give a brief account of the program's origin and development and then follow with comprehensive information on concepts and definitions, sources of data and methods of collection, statistical procedures, where the data are published, and their uses and limitations. Sources of additional technical information are given at the end of most chapters.

BLS strives to make the information we disseminate and the methods we use to produce this information as clear as possible, so the data could, in principle, be reproduced by qualified individuals. In practice, of course, most estimates included in BLS information products are not

directly reproducible by the public because the underlying microdata are confidential. The transparency, therefore, has the related goal of providing enough information about methodology for the public to understand the information and to have confidence in its preparation. Another major purpose is to assist users in determining whether BLS data adequately meet their needs, conceptually and in terms of the range of statistical error.

A vehicle that BLS is finding increasingly useful is the agency blog. The "Commissioner's Corner" gives us the opportunity to address topics of interest -- or topics we anticipate may become of interest -- in a less formal manner than we could in a news release or detailed analytical piece. As an example, last November we used the blog to explain what trade services mean in the Producer Price Index and how we measure them (http://blogs.bls.gov/blog/2014/11/20/trade-indexes-in-the-producer-price-index/). We also enabled comments on the blog so we can engage in a two-way conversation with our data users.

A key component in ensuring information quality is integrity, or the protection of data from corruption through unauthorized access. BLS data integrity guidelines publically spell out procedures to protect the confidentiality of BLS records, the process of data collection, and various security measures.

As part of our commitment to information quality, BLS encourages communication with its users. In addition to formal advisory councils, we foster discussions with the public at large by making it easy to reach staff through a variety of formats, including email, telephone, social media, and the postal service. We also support a formal complaint process, through which users who believe that BLS has disseminated information that does not meet our quality guidelines can submit their objections for official follow-up.

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We at the Bureau of Labor Statistics are aware that preconceived narratives are always difficult, and sometimes impossible, to dislodge. There are commenters in the U.S. public sphere who will always be distrustful of the government and who will continue to search for evidence of bias and manipulation in official statistics, and level accusations of misconduct against the organizations who produce the data. That is simply a reality of the environment in which we now operate.

Nonetheless, statistical agencies such as BLS can take measures to maintain and even enhance our credibility among the vast majority of data users and respondents. Ideally, these users and respondents then become proactive third-party advocates on our behalf. A focus on transparency, including methodological materials geared towards non-specialist readers, may well be one of the most effective approachs with which to begin.