

Commentary

Losing Our Census

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ABSTRACT *The Canadian government's June 2010 decision to replace the mandatory long-form version of the census with a voluntary National Household Survey (NHS) poses a real risk that governments, other public-sector and civil-society agencies, and private users alike will rely increasingly on outsourced and privatized forms of information holdings in lieu of reliable and transparent census data. This commentary places this decision in the context of the social history of census-taking and summarizes the central and serious problems of the planned NHS. We reflect on the contradiction between, on the one hand, the government's overall support for digital dissemination of high-quality data in an age of e-democracy and, on the other hand, its decision to accept the NHS's alternative, biased data. The Conservative government's arguments obscure the census decision's implications for contemporary and historical knowledge of Canadian society and for public discourse.*

KEYWORDS *Canadian population census; Canadian government; Politics of population; Communication; Digital media; e-Democracy*

RÉSUMÉ *La décision que le gouvernement canadien a prise en juin 2010 de remplacer le formulaire long obligatoire du recensement par une enquête nationale auprès des ménages (ENM) volontaire constitue un réel risque que les gouvernements, les agences du secteur public ou de la société civile et même les usagers aient recours de façon croissante à des fonds de renseignement privés et externalisés au lieu des données transparentes du recensement. Cette note critique replace cette décision dans le contexte de l'histoire sociale des recensements et résume le cœur des problèmes sérieux posés par l'ENM planifiée. Nous apportons une réflexion sur la contradiction que soulève, d'une part, le soutien général du gouvernement à la diffusion numérique de données de haute qualité à l'ère de la cyber-démocratie et, d'autre part, sa décision d'accepter comme alternative l'ENM et ces données partiales. L'argument du gouvernement conservateur occulte les implications de ces décisions sur les connaissances historiques et contemporaines de la société canadienne et sur le débat public.*

MOTS CLÉS *Recensement de la population canadien; Gouvernement canadien; Politique démographique; Communication; Médias numériques; Cyber-démocratie*

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Introduction

In June 2010, the Government of Canada announced its intention to eliminate the 35-year-old mandatory long form for the 2011 Census and replace it with a voluntary “National Household Survey” (NHS). Having provided no prior indication of its intention to eliminate the long-form census during Statistics Canada’s pre-2011 Census consultation process, the government ignored the voices of its usual stakeholders in the provinces; among municipalities, nongovernmental organizations, and academia; and among many other public and private interest groups. The reason given for the change, subsequently defended against all arguments to the contrary, was “to reasonably limit what many Canadians felt was an intrusion of their personal privacy.”¹

The bare details of the ensuing debate are well-enough known, since they were widely reported in the Canadian media and some international media. And the issue has had surprising “legs,” continuing on and off as a central news item well into the fall (Proudfoot, 2010). But what is at issue?

In this short commentary we place the government’s recent decision to cancel the mandatory long-form census in the context of the social history of census-taking and summarize the central and serious problems of the planned substitution of a voluntary survey for the census. We further reflect on the likelihood that the government’s contradictory concurrent emphasis on digital dissemination of high-quality data in an age of e-democracy will mask the problems of the survey’s alternative, biased data. Ultimately, we argue that the government’s arguments obscure the census decision’s implications for contemporary and historical knowledge of Canadian society and for public discourse.

A very short history of the Census

Despite the press the decision has received, the census remains a rather obscure enterprise to most Canadians, except, perhaps, as a vaguely remembered occasional obligation. Census-taking, however, is an old and in some respects state-defining practice.

The earliest census implemented in Canada was Jean Talon’s 1666 tally of the Québec colony, intended mainly to determine the reproductive and fighting potential of the population. By the mid-nineteenth century, Canadian state officials joined in a surprisingly internationalist census-taking enterprise. Through a trans-Atlantic consultation, mainly with the United States, England, and Belgium, they adopted the general principle of conducting nominative censuses (aimed at enumerating all individuals within places of residence) and developed a standard set of questions asking about gender, age, birthplace, relationship to the household head, school attendance, and primary occupation. In nineteenth-century Canada this enterprise was closely allied to the rise of representative government and its accompanying centralized political administration: after 1840, governance at the local level by local men of substantial property and influence was no longer possible.

The early Canadian census was one manifestation of a much wider transition in the Euro-American world that began in the late eighteenth century. Ian Hacking has characterized the movement as entailing a virtual “avalanche of numbers,” a deluge of counting, cataloguing, and classifying nearly every aspect of social life. By the mid-nineteenth century this movement had laid a foundation for statistical thinking,

and new forms of public administration on which the Western social, moral, and medical reform movements of the last century were founded (Hacking, 1990). Decade by decade the list of questions in the Canadian census, as elsewhere, has expanded and changed, reflecting shifting national and regional preoccupations with economic development, immigration, health, or ageing.

From a critical perspective in social studies of knowledge, census-taking is a technology classifying subjects to make up a population set in social and geographic space, constructed as an object of systematic study, social policy, and social projects (Curtis, 2001; Hacking, 1990). The census is only one among many categorizing devices, such as passports and residency permits, by which the state statistically depicts and fixes collective identities, at least momentarily. Nor has this locus of power over identity categories gone uncontested. The politics of the census has often been characterized as elite politics, with contestation of the balance of questions and wording, the costs, and the conduct of the census by government departments or by influential business or ethnic groups (Thompson, 2010). The Canadian census has been subject to its full share of such debates, including questioning of its necessity. As recently as 1984, a newly elected government threatened cancellation of the census, reversing its decision in the face of widespread protest (Dillon, 2010).

But census politics run deeper. National censuses have the power to “nominate into existence,” and its reverse, to “refus[e] to name” (Kertzer & Arel, 2002, p. 23). This is no mean power, especially in the context of drafting or re-drafting state boundaries, of debates on ethnic inclusion and exclusion, and in the constitution of racialized and ethnic discourses (Cohn, 1987; Nobles, 2002). In the influential study *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) identified the census, along with the museum and the map, as one of three key instruments aiding colonial states in creating borders and constructing identity categories and classificatory grids of its new administrative subjects. Such categorical identities, once in place, have in turn taken on political lives of their own, for example, as defining elements of rising nationalist politics. Moreover, though most interpretations of census-making assume they are top-down enterprises, census-taking has always entailed complicated and contested processes of authorship, interpretation, and translation of its categories. Respondents are census subjects, but not passive ones. The determined insistence of Canadian census officials not to allow “Canadian” as a response to the question of “Racial or Ethnic Origins” can be traced to the first national census of 1871. The equally determined insistence of large numbers to respond only in that way has a long and still partially hidden history (Boyd, Goldmann, & White, 2000).²

What’s the problem?

Since 1971, the Census has included a mandatory short form completed by all Canadians and a long form completed by a randomly selected 20% of households. The short form collects data on age, gender, marital status, household characteristics, and mother tongue. The long form includes a much wider array of demographic and socio-economic data. It is the only source of consistent information on many topics, including income, poverty, ethnicity, birthplace, citizenship, immigrant status, language spoken, knowledge of official languages, education, labour force activity, housing, disabilities, and so on.

The detailed questions on the long form have varied over time, but a strong core of similarly worded questions has been part of Canadian census-taking since 1871.

The announced replacement of the mandatory long form by a new voluntary National Household Survey (NHS) in 2011 is at the core of the problems. Initially, the minister of industry responsible for the decision, Tony Clement, made a bogus claim that the NHS was a wholly acceptable substitute, which prompted the resignation of his deputy minister, the chief statistician and head of Statistics Canada, Munir Sheikh. The reasons the NHS is an inadequate substitute warrant brief recital, since they lie at the heart of the controversy but are not self-evident.

Three central issues have been raised. First is the implications of statistical bias resulting from a voluntary survey. Second is the loss of a national “gold standard” for designing a range of other national surveys. Third is the loss of a consistent historical series for knowing ourselves as a country (Dillon, 2010; Green & Milligan, 2010).

The new NHS is expected to include more households than the long-form census (4.5 million households will receive the NHS questionnaire, rather than 2.9 million receiving the long form) and to cost an estimated 25 to 30 million dollars more. But the problem is that a large proportion of those surveyed will not respond. Further, sample survey experience informs us that *non-respondents* are *not* a random selection of individuals, but in fact very selective.³ Selective non-response creates statistical bias—a technical term meaning the result is a non-representative sample of the population. Green & Milligan express the consequences succinctly: “It is as if we are sampling from a different population; rather than sampling from the population of all adults in Canada, we are sampling from the population of adults who chose to respond to a survey” (Green & Milligan, 2010, p. 384). Worse, in the absence of collecting more information than is currently planned, it will not be possible adequately to estimate the differences between the non-representative sample and the population it is intended to represent. Worse again, we know that non-response in voluntary surveys is not trivial; indeed, it is large and has generally been increasing over time. Statistics Canada’s top-of-the-line surveys have response rates between 60 and 70%.

Who makes up this missing 30 or 40%? No definitive answer can be given to this question, but again sample survey experience indicates that the less literate, the less well-off, recent immigrants, and the very well-to-do are among the groups least likely to respond; in a word, those at the margins and extremes. Broadly, then, we have every reason to think that the results of an NHS will make Canada appear to be a country of greater moderation—less variant, less unequal, more middling—than a census of the population would reveal.

Second, the mandatory long form has served as the “gold standard” on which other key Statistics Canada surveys are designed and by which they are corrected, including the monthly Labour Force Survey and the Survey of Household Spending. The first is a primary source for estimating employment and unemployment and the second for establishing the Consumer Price Index, to give just two prominent examples. In brief, the design of such samples requires a “frame” that provides the information on which the various survey subgroups and oversamples can be appropriately

selected. Such frames are based on the most detailed and most reliable data available about the population being sampled—that is, the long form. The short-form census does not collect sufficient information for the purpose. Once completed, such samples are often corrected (weighted) by adjusting the results to match the population more closely (Green & Milligan, 2010). In addition to the labour force and household spending surveys, a number of special-purpose surveys, for example, about immigrant integration, will be impaired by the loss of this “gold standard.”

Finally, the long-form census has provided the basis of an irreplaceable more than 150-year historical series of nominal censuses: the long-form census since 1971 and the preceding ones, which collected a good deal of comparable information. Constructing a uniform series as a historical research resource has been the object of partnerships among a number of academic, genealogical, and government agencies for the past 20 years. The substitution of an NHS for a long-form census will jeopardize the continuity of the series and impair a unique capacity for historical knowledge and international comparison (Dillon, 2010).

A persuasive argument has it that census-making is increasingly influenced by a range of private-interest groups and organized publics. In turn, these groups have become devoted consumers and users of census data. In Western Europe and North America these reciprocal influences have become more deeply embedded features of the political landscape since World War II, and they were especially visible in the emergent new states following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kertzer & Arel, 2002). This engagement accounts in large measure for the surprisingly widespread negative public reaction to the decision to terminate the long-form census. Those reacting negatively included many of the government’s traditional supporters in the private sector, such as the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Association for Business Economics, the Toronto Board of Trade, and the Canadian Marketing Association. Public-sector and civil-society agencies were no less clear in expressing their dismay that they would be denied ready access to the most valuable repository of systematic information about the publics they serve. Local governments, community organizations, city planners, public health agencies, school boards and teacher associations, the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, and the Canadian Labour Congress all issued urgent statements calling for a reversal of the decision (for an example, see McKeown, 2010). Less obvious, perhaps, but influential in engendering the reaction is the widely taken-for-granted notion that the vitality of public life in a contemporary democracy entails routine dissemination of resources collected with public funds, including rising expectations of digital dissemination in the information age.

Contradictions

Contradictions thread the arguments and actions of the government regarding its census decision. The value of the census as the “gold standard” for data collected by the federal government is attested to by the history of routine reliance on it for purposes of governing, for delivery of public services, and for consumer research by private businesses. That the government understands this value is implicit in its decision not just to cancel the long-form census, but to replace it with the more costly, but now recognizably less useful and reliable, NHS. Given the current government’s continuing inter-

est in touting the advantages of the “information age” or “knowledge society,” and particularly the digital dissemination of publicly funded data, it is a curious and potentially misleading contradiction simultaneously to encourage wide and rapid dissemination of data while actively ensuring the reduction of its quality and value.⁴

Both the previous and current governments have maintained a rhetoric of building e-government service delivery, recognizing that a digital environment offers the most cost-effective ways to disseminate data between governmental and non-governmental users. Since 2001, for example, Statistics Canada’s Data Liberation Initiative has provided postsecondary institutions with unlimited access to its public-use micro-data files, databases, and geographic files for an annual fee in lieu of the increasingly high costs to individual users. More generally, in 2010, Industry Canada’s own *Consultation Paper on a Digital Economy Strategy for Canada* noted that “[g]overnments can play an important role in acting as model users of ICT and leading by example,” in part “by making publicly-funded research data more readily available to Canadian researchers and businesses” (Industry Canada, 2010, p. 14).⁵ Posted in May 2010, not one month before the long-form census was cancelled, this consultation paper suggests that the government believes not only in the value of publicly funded data for the broader economy, but also that digital data initiatives, including providing robust data-sharing and data-extraction platforms, can strengthen the government’s role in supporting the socio-economic programs it is committed to deliver.

Yet here again is a basic contradiction: on the one hand, the government places a high value on developing a digital-economy strategy through an online public consultation forum that was widely publicized, but on the other hand it refuses to seek public consultation on changing a national census. In fact, after Lee Jacobs of the Information and Communications Technology Council posted a recommendation to the digital-economy consultation website arguing that the long-form census should be retained, Industry Canada removed the post, having deemed it “not relevant.” This decision was taken even though the Council’s argument that “the census long form provides us with critical labour market information that is necessary to carry out long-term human resource planning” had risen to the status of voters’ second-most-popular “idea” (Ditchburn, 2010a).

Digital data masks

It is revealing to understand census-taking as a social technology of classification and data collection, but it is as much the foundation of a national, cultural, and historical archive. As such, is it not, as Innis once commented about national libraries, “a great instrument of imperial power”? (Innis, 1951, p. 135).⁶ In Innisian terms, then, is the census a “monopoly of knowledge,” but one now dismantled or rendered unnecessary in a digital environment?

A census represents one kind of state power, residing deeply in its particular identity categories, as well as in its conduct and the governmental uses to which it is put. As we argued above, however, in every decade the census appears to have become more thoroughly engrained in civil society and in the operations of the market.⁷ Considering the wide array of public and private users who have made use of the anonymous and aggregated versions of census data in recent decades, arguably the

balance of influence has shifted from the centre toward a wider public sphere, with census data becoming a significant feature in public discourse. Not least, the dissemination of census data provides one of the major sources of information on which citizens judge government policies and their implementation, providing basic grounds for accountability. The long-form's cancellation, then, has the potential, intended or not, to reverse the historical shift in the balance of power lodged in state data collection away from local and external stakeholders and back toward the centre. In consequence, the grounds of public discourse will narrow.

Digitality has prompted many enthusiastic predictions for the potential of e-government and e-democracy, as well as a belief that state caches of information will be converted to networked systems that exceed the control or power of any one authoritative body. A simple faith that network technologies, by their very essence, alter power dynamics pervades contemporary discourses of e-democracy (Barney, 2000). Government ministers' census arguments echo this faith blindly: a diversification of data sources in a "knowledge society," some comments suggest, is sufficient to replace the census. One claim has been that census users got a "free ride," while the government was the "heavy," with the implication that users themselves should pick up the bill (Chase & Howlett, 2010). Clearly, for many this is impossible. Moreover, the process of data diversification will, like the NHS, be highly selective, privileging those bodies, public and private, that have the material means to gather reliable data on their own. These may include certain provinces and not others, certain municipalities and not others, business interests that favour specific kinds of data over others, larger over smaller—and not least, political parties and candidates who develop detailed voter databases through "tele-town halls" and other means. Indeed, in response to a digital environment, Harold Innis might well have viewed the cancellation of the census as nourishing new concentrations of knowledge and dismantling the emerging balance of powers across public and private interests.

If nothing else, the current controversy makes plain that census-taking is a socially and politically constructed enterprise—one "social technology" with deep implications for the making of public policy and for historical understanding. The creation and uses of census data are in this sense irreducibly political. That is why otherwise seemingly esoteric statistical questions matter. But this certainly does not mean that all census and census-like survey data are the same. On the contrary, evidence about national populations and their histories based on carefully designed, transparent, and reliable methodologies are fundamental to democratic purposes. For these reasons, the NHS poses a real risk that governments, other public-sector and civil-society agencies, and private users alike will rely increasingly on outsourced and privatized forms of information holdings in lieu of reliable and transparent census data. Such holdings are not open to public scrutiny and "contribute to an enclosure of the information commons that deprives citizens of necessary political resources" (Barney, 2005, p. 127). Only trustworthy evidence can foster open communication, potentially wide dissemination, and debate about the grounds of policymaking and the terms of citizenship in a contemporary democracy.

Notes

1. See Roman (2010). The question of the invasion of privacy felt by some Canadians cannot be dismissed in the current political context, despite a good deal of evidence that extremely few concerns were ever expressed to Statistics Canada or to the federal privacy commissioner. Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart's office indicated they received only two complaints about the last census in 2006 and ultimately found that the census process complied with privacy laws. Statistics Canada forwards all privacy-related complaints about the census to the privacy commissioner (Ditchburn, 2010b). In an era of escalating private and public electronic records, the question of the balance between what the state may deem to be reasonable responsibilities of citizenship and the protection of personal privacy is worthy of more reflection. Mel Cappe, a former clerk of the Privy Council (1999-2002, which included the 2001 Census), noted that the question can be usefully framed by recognizing that since a random 20% of the population has been asked every five years to fill out a long-form census, this means that once every 25 years one adult reporting on behalf of their household has been asked to spend half an hour or so answering some 40 questions (Lam, 2010).
2. The tensions arising from this multiple authorship are revealed by examining publicly available historical census records, which show how often the officially "incorrect" responses were entered by enumerators on the doorstep of presumably insistent respondents and how equally often they were scratched out later by census officials to be replaced for published compilations. Among other sources, see the images provided by the Library and Archives of Canada, for example, for 1911 (Library and Archives Canada, 2008).
3. Compared with selective non-response, truly random non-response would not be a serious statistical problem; it generates no systematic bias, but simply reduces the size of the sample.
4. As Roy Romanow argued shortly after the announcement, "More than a few Canadians have noted the irony of a country reducing its information flow in the midst of an information age.... Trying to get a snapshot of our country with inaccurate and unreliable data is like using a camera without enough pixels. The blurrier the picture gets, the harder it becomes to recognize the face of our nation" (Romanow, 2010).
5. Such arguments, as Darin Barney has demonstrated, reach as far back as the mid-1990s, "to the Information Highway Advisory Council's repeated admonitions that government must become a 'model user' of [ICTs]" (Barney, 2005, p. 109).
6. Characteristically critical and cryptic, Innis views libraries in this instance not as public institutions for the dissemination of knowledge, but as seats of power: "The concern of the Assyrian Empire with the collection of Sumerian documents for the library at Nineveh has been paralleled at Alexandria, Rome, Paris, Berlin, London, Moscow, and Washington. In Canada we are attempting to follow in our own way at Ottawa" (Innis, 1951, p. 135).
7. Partly in defence of their government's recent decision, some ministers have claimed that evidence of falsified census responses is indicative of its imperfection. On the contrary, like the eventual admission of "Canadian" as a legitimate response to the question of "origins" due to respondents' insistence, one might interpret falsification as an aspect of resistant authorship, evidence of the process of negotiation and interpretation of a living archive across time.

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