Releasing Market Statistics
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Although no one would be especially surprised to learn that in 2003 the unemployment rate in France was at 9.4 percent(1) or that in that same year total wheat production in the US rose to 2,300 million bushels,(2) very few people actually know how these statistics are made public. In particular, most of us simply ignore the possibility that the very process of their being released publicly could ever pose something of a problem.

Nevertheless, that process is made up of various steps whose significance statisticians from the American Department of Agriculture were among the first to encounter in the 1930s. Each month during the growing season these statisticians were, in effect, charged with the task of forecasting the quantities that would be put on sale after the harvest. Now, while their numbers certainly helped those involved make decisions throughout the year, they had another effect – influencing the price of crops by virtue of the law according to which low estimates make prices rise (because what is rare is expensive) and vice versa. The statisticians quickly realized that, published without precautions, their data were permitting unscrupulous types to speculate in an unfair way on stock-market developments that they themselves had provoked.(3) Thus, they looked for a method that would allow them to deliver their numbers
in an equitable way, and the solution they came up with was to make them available to all those involved at exactly the same instant. But how could it be arranged so that these millions of people – who were, of course, spread out over the entire country – would all receive the numbers within a single instant? This problem was so crucial that, accompanying their numbers, the statisticians published an article complete with photos that would explain and clarify the process by which this synchronization could be achieved.(4)

The statisticians made the fruits of their labor public on the ninth day of every month at precisely 3:00 p.m., but in order to understand how they did this, we must go back several days. In fact, the publication process had already begun as soon as the Agriculture Department received reports that had been drafted by functionaries posted in all 48 American states, each focused on the agriculture of that particular state. The reports were sent by special courier to Washington, D.C., but, seeing as it was impossible that they would all arrive at exactly the same time, they were first collected in a secure mailbox, one that also functioned as a safe (photo 1).

On the day of publication, the mailbox was opened up by one of only two people who had a key to it: either the Secretary of Agriculture himself or, as was more often the case, the director of the departmental office in charge of the numbers. During this time, an entire wing of the building was temporarily blocked off by sliding doors in front of which armed guards prevented anyone from entering. In addition, all the curtains were closed so that no one could spy in from the outside of the building, (photo 2) and all the telephone lines were cut (photo 4) so that none of the data could be transmitted ahead of time. The statisticians were closeted with the reports of the 48 states inside a completely sealed enclosure from which, temporarily, nothing could enter or exit.

The statisticians then set about doing their work (photo 3). There were five of them in total, those deemed the most deserving in the Department. Their task consisted of reviewing the reports from the state statisticians along with some additional information in order to arrive at a set of forecasts by crop and by state that could be considered definitive at the time of their meeting. Since a forecast is not the result of a calculation but rather of an estimate, the process of arriving at an estimate began by isolating the statisticians and by allowing each to give a personal opinion. Then they regrouped and discussed their individual conclusions so as to reach a collective decision. The difficulty was that they had to reach an agreement fairly rapidly, for they had to have their work completed by exactly 2:45 p.m. If disagreements lasted too long, the chair of the meeting would use his own authority to bring the meeting to a close. Thus even the numbers themselves depended in part on the method of disclosure.

Once this brigade of experts had determined what numbers to print, they were presented to the Secretary of Agriculture himself, who would then countersign them (photo 5 shows Henry Wallace, who was Secretary of Agriculture under President Franklin D. Roosevelt before becoming himself an unsuccessful candidate in the 1948 presidential election). That way, the scientific legitimacy of the data could be confirmed through recourse to another form of legitimization, that of politics.

The reports containing the fateful numbers were then copied many times over (photo 6). At 3 minutes to 3:00 p.m., the chief statistician picked up a stack of such reports and left the secure wing under the attentive gaze of the guard, who would not have allowed anyone to leave prior to this moment (photo 7). The statistician then entered a room that was divided into two halves by a long yellow line painted on the floor. On one side of the line, journalists were waiting impatiently to communicate the numbers to their newspapers; on the other side were a
row of telephone booths against the wall and some small work tables. The statistician placed a report face down on each table and then moved away.

During this time, the journalists had been gathering along the yellow line just like the race-car drivers used to do before the Le Mans race. When the guard blew the whistle at exactly 3:00 p.m., the journalists would throw themselves into the telephone booths (photo 8) from which they would feverishly call their newspapers to announce the numbers, numbers that would then be thrown into the field to help farmers forecast their yearly budget, into the stock exchange so that speculators could take up their positions and indeed all around the world to those interested in the American agricultural markets. This public, thus placed in the “starting blocks,” also depended upon the procedure of disclosure for its own constitution.

This technique of disclosure, one that is still in use today,(5) does not deliver already established information to a public that is already constituted as such, although this is often thought to be the case. On the contrary, as we have often seen in this work, the way in which information is disclosed participates both in the production of the information itself as well as in the constitution of the public that receives that information. But that is not all it does. As well, it seems to have been the case that in order to acquire a public at all, it was first necessary to produce its complementary sphere (as one says in mathematics of a grouping that is the complement of another), that is, a secret space. In order to publish the economic data, a sphere of obscurity and a structure of withholding also had to be constructed in which the data could first be developed and from which the figures could emerge as part of its process of entering the public sphere. Thus, the construction of the public is perhaps indissociable from the production of the secret; in other words, it is inseparable from the creation and maintenance of the barrier, unique and singular every time, between the public and its secret.(6)

Translated from the French by Sarah Clift

(1) Eurostat data: http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/newcronos/queen/
(3) In 1905, one of their statistician-colleagues had been convicted for having profited from his situation of being among the first informed and for making millions by speculating on the cotton market.
(4) Joseph A. Becker, “Crop reports are hot news,” in: The Nation’s Agriculture, October 1937, pp. 6-9. The photo in the lower left-hand corner is not terribly important for the present argument: it simply shows the crop meter, a machine invented to measure the length of the fields used for different crops. Rather, we will focus on the photos at the top and on the right, numbering them 1 to 8 in a clockwise direction.
(5) Everything – the removable walls, the guards, the curtains – is the same except the race to the phones, which no longer exists; the journalists now write their reports sitting behind terminals and are only permitted to send them when their computers are reconnected to the internet, at exactly 3:00 p.m.
(6) [Secret/Public], “Du lit de la tyrannie au droit à l’indifférence, la double signification du secret,” in: Vacarme, 25, Fall 2003, pp. 15-18.