

EXTRACTS FROM OPENING ADDRESS  
BY COMMISSIONER RICHARD BURKE TO EUROSTAT SEMINAR:  
Protection of privacy, automatical data processing and progress  
in statistical documentation

---

Luxembourg, 10.30 hrs - 11 December 1984

I am particularly happy to address you today because I frequently find myself confronted by some of the dilemmas which you will be considering during the next two and a half days. As a Member of the Commission I am acutely aware of the vital importance of up-to-date, relevant and reliable information as an indispensable aid to rational decision making. In my role as the Commissioner directly responsible for the Statistical Office of the European Communities I am familiar with the many problems encountered in providing such information and also of the importance of ensuring, at the same time, that the confidentiality of records entrusted to us is preserved. As a member of the public and as a public representative I have long been conscious of the many and very real concerns with the privacy of the individual. Few of us are happy to disclose personal information to strangers, whether this be in the setting of an interview or in the more impersonal context of completing a questionnaire. The advent of powerful computing facilities has increased these concerns. The possibilities of linking together information from different sources to create a detailed and relatively complete profile of the characteristics of an individual are greater than ever before. There are fears, in some quarters at least, that statisticians and others with access to data will be unable to resist the temptation to exploit these possibilities. It is perhaps particularly appropriate that, as we approach the end of 1984, a group such as this should examine the ways in which we can be safeguarded from such Orwellian fears.

The conflict between the need for information and the genuine fears of the consequences of misuse of that information seems to me to be critical. If this seminar can assist in the resolution of that conflict it will have made an important contribution to the solution of a major problem. This problem does not affect only the statistician who finds himself squeezed between, on the one hand, ever increasing demands for information and, on the other hand, a growing reluctance to provide the raw material on which that information is based. It is also a matter of serious public concern which is expressed most commonly as the conflict between the decision maker's need to know and the individual's right to privacy.

I am confident that the ethics of the statistical profession leave little to be desired. What is important, nevertheless, is that the public perception of statistical ethics should be such as to reassure those outside the profession who are concerned with matters of privacy and confidentiality. We have seen, for example in the medical profession, the establishment of ethical boards to adjudicate on proposed areas of research. In some countries similar moves to oversee the activities of official statisticians have started to take shape. Is it the case that statistical ethics are too important to be left solely to the statistician?

The importance of the topic of this seminar is amply illustrated by the extensive public attention which it has received in recent years. Many countries across the world have either adopted or are actively considering legislation to control the collection and dissemination of information. Such legislation typically is applicable to a far wider range of information than that handled by statisticians. Further, it frequently recognises, and makes provision for, the particular characteristics of statistical information. The special provisions made for statistics go some way to ease the burden on the official statistician but, at the same time, they impose responsibilities upon him which he cannot and should not evade.

I look forward to seeing the results of your discussions. At the same time, I can assure you that we at the Commission will continue to be very mindful of the need to strike a balance between our requirements for information and our awareness of the great public concern as to the methods by which the information is collected and the uses to which it may be put.