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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. See also page xv, *Science*, 25 September 1970. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Room 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE-6-1858.

Fact-Crazy, Theory-Shy?

President Nixon has appointed a commission* to conduct the "first comprehensive review" of federal statistics in more than two decades. Its mandate also includes the study of the needs for information about the functioning of the American economy and society. We hope that in the course of their study, the Commission will examine the balance between *collection* of information and its *analysis*. Societies differ significantly in the ways they collect, process, and use information. Some societies, for instance those of France and Germany before World War II (before their "Americanization"), were highly analytic, often short on facts but long on theorizing. On the other hand, the American system seems heavily skewed in the opposite direction; it often seems hip on fact but adverse to prolonged analysis.

This empiricistic tendency is reported from a large variety of American information systems. The House Defense Appropriation Committee found, in 1968, that "unprocessed reports on Southeast Asia alone recently filled 517 linear feet of file drawer space at the headquarters of the Defense Intelligence Agency." Dr. Conrad Taeuber, associate director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, pointed out that, because of shortage of funds for analysis, "many of the significant analytic cross tabulations of the census data are left for an if-and-when basis and frequently cannot be carried out." Various data banks have been set up to bring together raw data to ease the analysis. Many of these banks, whose annual budget runs in six-digit figures or higher, are infrequently used, often yielding a lower volume of research than their custodial budget.

The reasons leading to this analysis gap are numerous. They vary from relatively manageable ones, such as granting and research-budgeting procedures, to difficult-to-alter Anglo-Saxon cultural traits. Many federal agencies and foundations frown on researchers who "budget" for analysis more than the last year of a project. ("Professors should 'think' on their own time.") Both as a frequent recipient of research grants (from agencies as different as OEO, DOD, NSF, and OE) and, recently, as a member of two grant-review boards of government agencies, I found that funds for the collection of data are much more readily available than funds for their analysis. As studies frequently run behind schedule, the analysis phase is often short—and shortchanged. In most courses on "methodology" in social science most of the time is spent on teaching the collection of data and preliminary tabulations. The more difficult-to-communicate art of analysis and interpretation is squeezed into the closing weeks of the semester.

Prestige is a factor. Dr. Harold Orlans, of the Brookings Institution, has written: "More encouragement and support can be given to the critical review and synthesis of bodies of knowledge, a function that, when it is done well, *should be* esteemed as highly as the generation of new knowledge." But it is not.

The deeper reasons for the analysis gap stem from the American tendency to be more trusting of "hard" facts than of theorizing that still carries overtones of scholasticism and dogma. Pragmatism finds data more appealing than speculation about its meaning.

The net result is a national information system which knows much more about the trees than the forest; a national perspective which is often well-informed about the specifics but lacks a comprehensive, systematic overview. Sufficient impressionistic data exists about this imbalance of our information system that the new Commission might do well to devote some of its time to ascertain its dimensions; if these should prove to be considerable, the Commission might explore ways of correcting the imbalance.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Chairman, Department of Sociology, Columbia University, and Director, Center for Policy Research*

* President's Commission on Federal Statistics, a 14-man panel whose chairman is W. Allen Wallis, president of the University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.