Let’s suppose that I am a journalist. I read somewhere that real wages have been stagnant and I want to illustrate this point in an article I am writing. I discover that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) on a monthly basis produces a series called “real average hourly earnings.” So I go to the BLS website to get some historical data on that series for my article. When I get there, I find:

I don’t immediately see a link for real average hourly earnings, but I do see a search option up in the right-hand corner. So I type in “real average hourly earnings” there and get:
As you can see on the screen shot on the previous page, a bunch of references pop up, mainly to BLS media releases that have only very limited recent data. I am looking for a longer time series, not just a few recent data points, for my article. So I go back to the starting page and click on “home.”

One of the options I then see there in a drop-down menu is called “pay and benefits.” That sounds right. Earnings are “pay,” after all. So I click there and get:
The result is a whole list of options as the screenshot on the prior page shows, but “real average hourly earnings” is not one of them. So I go back to the home page and try “data tools” since I am looking for a data series. Another drop-down menu appears:

One of the options there is “series report,” so I click on that one hoping that real average hourly earnings might be one of the series reported. The result is shown below:
Sadly, what I find is that if you want a particular data series such as the one I am searching, you have to know its ID number. But wait! There is another option to click on “series ID formats.” Maybe I will find a listing of the ID number for “real average hourly earnings” there. Another disappointment results. But I do find an option called “national employment, hours, and earnings.” That option at least has the words “hours” (which is close to “hourly”) and “earnings.” So I click there and get:

This time I get a lot of strange information about things like where a seasonal adjustment would be indicated in the ID number, if only I had the ID.

We could go on with this fruitless search but you surely get the point. The key issue here is that what should be a user-friendly public website just plain isn’t. Why - when I search for “real average hourly earnings” - don’t I immediately land on a webpage which gives the historical data for that series. Note that “real average hourly earnings” is not one of the more obscure data series produced by BLS. BLS in fact puts out a monthly release just for that series.

BLS has been in the data business for a long time. The agency’s history actually predates the creation of its parent, the U.S. Department of Labor, early in the 20th century. BLS got on the web when the web got going and there has been plenty of time since then to produce a website that simply lists every series and doesn’t require some arcane ID number. The website should be accessible to folks such as my hypothetical journalist, and not just to professional users of labor market data who have figured out the vagaries of the website. There are commercial data providers who make BLS data and data from other official government agencies available – generally for a cost - in just the simple way I have suggested. Other government websites are more user-friendly than BLS offers. Check out, for example, the website of the U.S. Bureau of Economic Affairs, the agency that puts out the national income accounts.
Note that this musing is not dealing with the methodology behind particular data series. Maybe “real average hourly earnings” has drawbacks as a measurement. Maybe our hypothetical journalist would do better to use some other series. Those considerations are separate issues. The only point being made here is that if a data series is being made public, the figures should be easy to access.

It can be done.