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Topic: Managing communication and dissemination

GOVERNANCE MODELS FOR COMMUNICATION IN STATISTICAL INSTITUTIONS

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Organizational issues have been the subject of considerable interest in the statistical world for a number of years. Among the issues discussed have been the pros and cons of the so-called functional organization, where data collection is centralized in a special organizational unit. But other organizational issues, as well, have been the focus of attention at international gatherings in the statistical field.

2. In my nine years of working with statistical communication, however, I cannot recall a single workshop, seminar or conference featuring a discussion on how to organize communication in a national statistics institution. Until now, this has been a non-existent organizational topic. This working session is probably the first to handle management of communication as a specific topic in its own right.

3. There are several possible explanations for this lack of attention. You might be led to believe that the topic has simply not been considered important, as communication might only be regarded as a peripheral activity in a statistical institution. This is contradicted, however, by the importance publicly attached to communication by the top management of central National Statistical Institutions (NSIs).

4. An alternative speculation is that it might simply be the case that there is only one sensible way of organizing and governing communication in a NSI, and that this model has been intuitively implemented by most modern institutions. This, however, seems even less plausible, as experience shows that there are great variations in the ways of organizing communication, even among closely related and neighbouring national statistical institutions.

5. The purpose of this paper, therefore, will be to contribute to drawing the outlines of this variation in organizational models, to explaining the (partly historical) reasons underlying different governance models, and to describing the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of organizing communication.

II. COMMUNICATION TASKS IN STATISTICAL INSTITUTIONS

6. There are several kinds of communication tasks commonly carried out in statistical institutions. Some tasks generally encountered are listed below:

- 7.
- Communication and publishing strategy
 - Website(s)
 - Databanks
 - News releases
 - Monitoring and servicing the media

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- Monthly and publications and other periodicals
- Statistical yearbook(s)
- One-off or thematic publications
- User and/or citizen surveys
- Design and/or style guides
- Profile and presentations
- Education of colleagues
- Improving language
- Intranet
- Other channels of internal communication.

8. Even if most of these communication tasks are carried out by most NSIs, they are by no means always the overall responsibility of the communication division. Responsibility for these tasks may be shared between two or more organizational units. The reason for this **may** be a conscious choice by the organization.

9. My claim is however, that for many - and maybe the majority - of these kinds of institutions the organization of communication is not a result only of a conscious choice but rather of the historical development of communication in the institution. This claim is supported by public relations research in government institutions, in general, and by my own experience of national statistical institutions in particular. In the next section I shall give an overview of the development of different governance models for communication in public institutions, with some examples from the statistical field.

III. DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION IN (STATISTICAL) INSTITUTIONS

A. Growing out of Dissemination

10. Traditionally, many communication divisions in NSIs started out as dissemination divisions. In government communication, the notion of dissemination originates from the years during and immediately after World War II, when governments felt the need to spread information on many everyday subjects from healthy nutrition to daylight saving. In those years, the focus really was on **dissemination** (one-way communication), as the channels for dissemination were few and partly monopolized by the government (radio, later TV). A focus on **communication** (two-way) really wasn't necessary, as the public didn't have much choice but to pay attention to the messages, and they didn't have any means for giving feed-back to the messages or entering into a dialogue with the "disseminators".

11. It is strange that statistical institutions are still using the term dissemination in an era when every high school boy is able to disseminate whatever he wants on the Internet. Communication professionals have, for decades, been focusing on communication instead, and the real problem for NSIs is not to spread information - that is to make information available - but to make sure there are users of the information out there and enter into a dialogue with these users; that is, to **communicate**.

12. Formerly in NSIs dissemination was often seen as an appendix to statistics, something that had to be performed when the "real" job was done. As a consequence of this, dissemination received low status and was often performed by staff from inside the organization, that is, with traditional statistical or clerical background.

13. The need for staff with communication skills was rarely recognized from the outset. When I started in Statistics Denmark in 1999, I was the first employee with a professional communication background. And, I was the first head of dissemination/communication recruited from outside the organization as well. One of the first NSIs to my knowledge to employ journalists in the dissemination/communication unit was Statistics Norway. The idea is now widely accepted in the statistical world, but you can still find modern NSIs, like Statistics Sweden, without communication professionals in their communication department.

14. Even if the idea of communication professionals has been widely accepted by NSIs, the introduction of new kinds of professions has given rise to resistance and some degree of conflict inside the organiza-

tions as I have tried to show in papers at earlier work sessions. The statisticians may feel their professional position threatened and react accordingly.

B. Growing out of Information Technology

15. During the 1980s, statistical databanks started to be established by NSIs, and due to their technical nature these new channels often started out in the Information Technology (IT) division. When the internet then came of age during the 1990s, and statistical institutions started to operate websites and databanks on the Internet, these new channels of communication often remained the responsibility of the IT division.

16. There were advantages to this. The organization already had agreed to adhere to standards and regulations on the use of IT tools. Hence, it was natural that Internet communication channels, as well, demanded discipline and adherence to standards. This could make the job somewhat easier for the new IT communication divisions compared to the traditional dissemination divisions.

17. As to staffing, it was readily accepted that IT divisions required specialized skills, not normally found in the organization. Hence, an IT communication division in charge of Internet media had the possibility of hiring staff with professional communication background, without questions asked.

18. In some NSIs the “old” dissemination division and the “new” Internet communication division continued as separate units whereas in others they amalgamated into one single communication division. This happened in Statistics Denmark in the late 1990s, but for several years this new unit still carried the historical designation “Publishing and Databanks”.

C. Growing out of Press Office

19. While the two preceding scenarios are quite common among statistics institutions, a third scenario is more common with government organizations oriented towards policy issues. For many of these organizations, media and the press is the most important public, hence some kind of press or media office is the first to be established, typically close to the top management of the organization.

20. When press offices are often organizationally placed close to the top management, the reason behind this is that they are acting both as a service to the media and as advisors to the management. They are usually staffed with professionals with media experience, typically journalists.

21. Press offices may, at a later stage, expand their activities into other fields of communication, as for example publishing and websites, but if the unit grows out of its original size, it may become too big to retain its place in close contact to the top management. Organizations tend to place small units concentrated on strategic issues close to the management and operational units further down in the organizational structure. Statistics Netherlands, for example, have a Department of Communication directly under the management board, and a Publication and Information Department placed further down the structure in the Division of Macro-Economic Statistics and Dissemination.

D. Growing out of Marketing

22. In commercial organizations, in particular, the marketing function is developed rather early and may, at a later stage, take in other communication duties, developing into a kind of combined marketing and communication unit. In government institutions like NSIs this is seldom encountered, as the need for marketing typically develops later than the need for communication.

23. When NSIs have a marketing function this is, in most cases, placed as a part of the communication unit. Other constructs may be found, though. In Statistics Denmark the responsibility for marketing of publications, etc., lies with the Communication Division, whereas the marketing of tailor-made and special statistics lies with a special division within the Department of Sales and Marketing.

E. Growing (partly) out of Human Resources

24. Responsibility for internal communication in the organization may be placed in various departments or divisions. Sometimes, however, it grows naturally out of the Human Resources division, which may be the first to try to professionalize these activities. In some NSIs, hence, we find the responsibility for Intranet, staff magazine, internal billboards, etc., placed together with human resources

25. One advantage of this is that Human Resources is already working with issues of general staff interest, working environment, job satisfaction, etc. A disadvantage of this is that internal communication will not be integrated in the professional development of communication in general in the organization. In particular the Intranet may benefit from close relations to the web strategy of the organization.

IV. PROS AND CONS OF CENTRALIZED COMMUNICATION

A. What is meant by “centralized”?

26. When I use the word “centralized” regarding communication in an organization, I am referring to the fact that overall responsibility for all communication activities is placed with one division or department. This means that the communication division takes care of development and quality control in media relations, publishing, databanks, website, Intranet, etc.

27. Even if the overall responsibility for communication is placed with a single unit, this doesn't mean that all or most communication is also carried out by this unit. On the contrary, in modern organizational theory, actual communication tasks are often decentralized as much as possible. The reason for this is that in knowledge-intensive organizations, the communication division will risk developing into a bottleneck, if all communication should pass through it. Instead, the main tasks of the communication division are to develop tools, train the organization in communication skills and push the development further.

B. Advantages

28. The main advantage of establishing a single communication unit in an organization is that this makes professionalism possible. The organization is able to attract and hire a competent and experienced communication professional to direct and develop the communication unit, and the head of the unit will, in turn, be able to attract good professionals that may want to work in the organization.

29. This, of course, all depends on how top management considers communication and the ensuing status ascribed to communication in the organization.

30. The communication professionals will have each their special skills and responsibilities in the unit, but they share a common academic background which makes for good discussions and fruitful development of new ideas in the total communication field.

31. If communication is the responsibility of more than one organizational unit, you may still be able to hire communication professionals in these units, but the organization will not achieve the same synergy, and the professionals will not be able to support each other and enrich the professional climate. They will, by nature, easily be isolated.

32. Size matters. A bigger unit makes it possible to run bigger development projects, whereas small units may have a hard time finding resources for developing new practices. In a bigger unit you can hire staff with broader experience and different professional fields in order that they can supplement each other.

C. Disadvantages

33. The main disadvantage of establishing a single communication unit is that, in an NSI, this unit will easily be rather big and be carrying out a lot of operational activities. Hence, it will not be attrac-

tive for the top management to have the division report directly to the management as they are interested in the strategic aspects of communication, not in the operational. In my experience, staff units referring to the top management exceeding 5-7 people are rarely found.

34. Units with operational activities are normally placed on a level with other operational units and statistical divisions. In this, case the head of communication will not have automatic and direct access to the top management which will seriously hamper his/her possibility of acting strategically.

35. This disadvantage may be compensated for in different ways. In Statistics Denmark the Communication Division is placed in a department named "User Service" together with other operational divisions serving external or internal users: IT Division, Administration, Library, etc. The Head of Communication reports to the Director of User Service when it comes to resources, staff and operational activities, but to the National Statistician when it comes to strategic issues. This may sound a bit schizoid, but works well in practice. Besides the Head of Communication takes part in management board meetings to keep informed of all strategic issues.

V. COMMUNICATION IN THE 21. CENTURY

36. Communication is certainly a specialized professional field and so it will remain. But at the same time communication theory at different levels is taught in many other educational programs, and it is acknowledged that communication skills are necessary in more and more jobs.

37. The aim of a professional communication unit is not to monopolize communication. On the contrary, the aim is to enable the rest of the organization to carry out their communication duties at the highest level. I sometimes, jokingly, tell my staff that our ultimate aim is to render ourselves superfluous if we succeed in teaching the statisticians how to communicate.

38. Of course, this will never happen as there will always be supervisory and development work to do in communication, not to mention strategic advice and coaching to the management. But as communication gets ever more integrated in other professions, I think that we may witness a development where communication units gets smaller, concentrating more on development and strategy, and perhaps retaining an external advisor when large projects demands more manpower than readily available.

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