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**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

Fifty-third plenary session
(Geneva, 13-15 June 2005)

**REPORT OF THE WORK SESSION ON STATISTICAL DISSEMINATION
AND COMMUNICATION**

Prepared by the UNECE secretariat

1. The Joint UNECE/OECD Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication was held from 14 to 15 February 2005 in Henley-on-Thames, United Kingdom. It was attended by participants from: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States. The Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) were also represented. Experts from DataBeuro Limited, Economist Intelligence Unit and University of Manchester participated at the invitation of the OECD.
2. The agenda contained the following substantive topics:
 - (i) Reputation management for target audiences;
 - (ii) Sketching out the future of statistical publications;
 - (iii) How to train and educate statisticians to tell the story behind the numbers.
3. Opening addresses were delivered by Ms. Helena Rafalowska (United Kingdom) and Ms. Tiina Luige (UNECE). They emphasized the importance of aligning public data dissemination to the changing needs of users of statistics, in particular the growing demands due to technological developments.
4. Mr. David Marder (United Kingdom) acted as Chairperson.
5. The following persons acted as Session Organizers: Topic (i) Ms. Helena Rafalowska and Mr. David Marder (United Kingdom); Topic (ii) Ms. Eileen Capponi, Mr. Toby Green (OECD) and Topic (iii) Ms. Vicki Crompton (Canada). Ms. Colleen Blessing (United States) acted as Discussant for Topic (ii).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

6. The participants considered the proposal for future work put forward by an ad hoc group composed of Mr. Steve Matheson (Australia), Ms. Anne Nuka (Estonia), Mr. Sebastian van den Elshout (Netherlands), Ms. Fride Eeg-Henriksen (Norway), and Mr. Andrei Maslyanenko (Russian Federation). The delegates also recalled the list of topics recommended for future work by the Steering Group on Statistical Dissemination and Communication (CES/BUR.2005/12/Add.4). They considered that it would be useful to continue the exchange of experience in the field of statistical dissemination and communication, in particular concerning the emerging features of Internet publishing. Such an activity would aim at developing guides/recommendations on good practices.

7. The participants recommended organizing a work session focusing on the dissemination of statistics over the Internet in about 18 months. The meeting would deal with managerial and organizational aspects of Internet publishing. The following topics were suggested for consideration at the meeting:

- (i) Comparisons/ review of web pages of statistical agencies;
- (ii) Self-help strategies and interactive applications (navigation, help facilities, frequently asked questions, usability);
- (iii) Users and uses of statistics;
 - user groups,
 - return/reward for data providers and respondents,
 - educational resources, statistical literacy.

The Steering Group on Statistical Dissemination and Communication will formulate the final proposal for the substantive programme of the next meeting.

8. Additional topics that could be considered in future international work on statistical dissemination and communication are:

- (i) Web contents management (output databases, release management, web authoring, workflow and approval/clearance, special products for special target audiences);
- (ii) Statistical portals (reference to other national agencies producing statistics, a linking policy to/from agencies, copyright issues, charging issues);
- (iii) Standardization/harmonization of national statistical office (NSO) web pages
 - core contents;
 - data/metadata;
- (iv) Progressive release/rolling update of statistical data on Internet;
- (v) Code of publishing (including publishing data on sensitive ethnic/minority groups, like immigrants, indigenous, elderly, single parent, etc.).

FURTHER INFORMATION

9. The conclusions reached during the discussion of the substantive items of the agenda are contained in the Annex.

10. The participants thanked the Office for National Statistics of the United Kingdom for hosting the meeting and providing excellent facilities for its work.

11. Presentations and all background documents for the meeting are available on the website of the UNECE Statistical Division (<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2005.02.dissemination.htm>).

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

12. The participants adopted the present report before the Work Session adjourned.

ANNEX

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS REACHED AT THE WORK SESSION ON STATISTICAL DISSEMINATION AND COMMUNICATION

I. Reputation management for target audiences

Documentation: Invited papers by Russian Federation, United Kingdom and United States; supporting papers by Denmark and Norway.

Session organizers: Ms. Helena Rafalowska and Mr. David Marder (United Kingdom)

1. The meeting considered various aspects of maintaining a statistical office's reputation. These aspects relate to the trust of the respondents concerning protection of their privacy, as well as to the quality, accuracy, reliability and timeliness of published information. There was a general agreement that political impartiality was a very important element in reputation management. A good reputation is critical for public confidence in the statistical office. It influences the response rates, which in turn have a big impact on data quality.
2. A reputation is difficult to build but easy to lose. Maintaining a good reputation is becoming more challenging for statistical dissemination with the growing use of the Internet because any errors and misinterpretations are more widely and rapidly propagated. Furthermore, the world is becoming more complex and harder to measure, statistical offices are playing a more important role in national life, their activities might be perceived as being politicized and the media are often looking for controversial material. There is also competition from other (private) data providers who do not always adhere to the strict quality standards of official statistics.
3. To manage reputation in these conditions requires identifying major influences on reputation, finding ways to monitor public trust, establishing a clear powerfully expressed brand identity and overcoming an innately conservative culture. Reputation management should involve reactive measures to respond to negative media coverage, but also proactive measures aimed at ensuring a better understanding by users and thus creating the preconditions for positive coverage. It helps to have foresight on the critical issues that might emerge in the near future.
4. There may be different reasons for criticism of statistical agencies: lack of awareness of users about the scope and contents of disseminated information, general mistrust in government agencies, information leaks, but also errors and inappropriate communications originating from statistical agencies. Openness, transparency and readiness to accept and explain the mistakes are very important for maintaining a good reputation. At the same time, statistical offices should be ready to confront unfounded criticism. Some concrete measures for building trust with the media and general public mentioned were: a clear policy for data releases, careful preparation of press conferences, media access to statistical specialists, clear and direct (unmediated) communication, ensuring professionalism in explaining statistics to the public and publishing the corrections of errors on the website.
5. Suggestions were made on how to deal with errors so that they would not have a negative impact on the statistical office's reputation. It is desirable to have a procedure in place to handle errors. The response depends on the scale and type of error. Often the smaller errors are just corrected on the website but more significant errors require special notification. Different methods are used to create peer pressure to avoid errors, e.g., internally distributing a list of errors found by the public and by statistical office staff, or requiring any correction to be approved by the director.
6. The importance of having quality checks and procedures to verify the data was underlined. These procedures were self-evident with paper publications but are less clear when large amounts of data are released on Internet through databases. The data should not be made available to users without a final check by the subject-matter statisticians. The advantage of Internet dissemination is that mistakes can be corrected

immediately.

7. It was considered important to distinguish between errors and revisions (so-called statistical updates) due to better methodology, improved source data, etc. The reasons for revising or updating data have to be explained to users. Many national statistical offices have a policy to acknowledge the date and nature of the revision on their websites to flag them to the user.

8. A special type of threat to reputation is misinterpretation of statistical information by the media. The ONS, UK is one of the few (if not the only) offices that always reacts by sending a letter to the editor of the newspaper that has made the error. All these letters are posted on Internet and about half of them are published in the media. This action has a certain effect on the media who might be more careful in interpreting the data next time. Other suggestions to confront misinterpretation include building good working relations with journalists, publishing explanations on the website and preparing the analysis in the statistical office so that its results can be used by journalists.

9. With respect to media relations, several delegates highlighted the importance of monitoring media coverage and measuring the statistical office's reputation. Often, the statistical offices target their media relations to newspapers. However, the broadcast media are gaining greater importance for the public than the printed media. Research shows that the impact of television and the trust of the public in information provided by television are much greater than in the case of newspapers. Special media events (like photo and television opportunities) have been very successful in getting media coverage, for example in connection with population census, household budget surveys, etc. The participants also stressed the importance of relations with other categories of users, such as research and educational institutions. Sensitivity to stakeholders' reactions is a very important part of reputation management.

10. Participants pointed out that releasing detailed data on ethnic or minority groups might influence the perception of the general public and respondents. Sometimes such data can lead to political decisions influencing the minority groups. Therefore, such releases need careful handling and explanation. Although disseminating detailed data on groups of individuals is not in conflict with the data confidentiality principle, its public perception is a very sensitive issue and may cause negative media coverage. Making available clear, good quality methodological guidelines of the work of the statistical office may help to counter unfounded criticism.

II. Sketching out the future of statistical publications

Documentation: Invited papers by OECD, MIMAS, Databeuro and Economist Intelligence Unit; supporting papers by Australia, Finland, Netherlands, United States (2 papers), UNECE and Eurostat.

Session organizers: Eileen Capponi and Toby Green (OECD), **Discussant:** Colleen Blessing (EIA, United States).

11. The session reviewed the impact of Internet and other means of electronic publishing on disseminating statistics. The first part of the session dealt with the changing roles of publishers, aggregators, distributors and librarians in the dissemination chain from the author (statistical office) to the reader. The second part focused on reviewing the data dissemination strategies of statistical offices with regard to printed publications and their place within the system of statistical products.

12. Most of the statistical agencies have opened an on-line access to their dissemination databases. Intermediaries (aggregators and distributors) often act as reference points for data provided by different NSOs. Examples quoted in the discussion showed the interest of educational and research institutions and also government agencies, businesses and individual users in such an intermediary service. These services represent an added value by focusing on the data of greatest interest to users, easier navigation and formats adjusted to the expected use of data. They also allow combining data originating from different sources. The examples presented concerned mainly the use of data published by statistical departments of the international organizations by academic and commercial distributors. However, an example was given of a national

statistical agency that combined within one Internet product, its own data with the data coming from international sources.

13. There was a discussion on the function of libraries and librarians. It may appear that their role as intermediary would not be needed in the future because users can access data services directly. However, the librarians will continue to play an important role as information specialists, helping users to locate and assemble the necessary information. They can gather expertise over time on available sources, their quality and reliability, frequency and time of updates, etc. Librarians have to adapt to the new technological developments but the growing volume of available information makes their role in providing discovery services even more important.

14. The meeting reflected on how the readers find the required information. Search engines are one of the possibilities, and much effort has been made to create sophisticated and specialized search engines. However, it was stressed that there is a surprisingly low share of users looking for statistics through search engines. Studies of users' behaviour show that they often limit themselves to a basic simple search and do not use the advanced search features.

15. Additional difficulties in looking for statistical data are the specific indicator and variable names used by statistical offices which do not coincide with the terms according to which users perform their search. Some offices are trying to solve this problem by developing a special search engine, creating a structure for most common searches, listing topical breakdown on the web pages, etc. Finding more efficient ways to organize the search for statistical data on Internet is an area that will require attention in future. In this connection, it was recalled that the plenary session of the 52nd Conference of European Statisticians called for a discussion on common structural elements of websites of national statistical offices. The harmonization of NSO web pages would facilitate finding statistical information and promote common features of statistics originating from various offices.

16. Greater possibilities created by emerging technologies also increase the expectations of users. They expect greater timeliness and better availability of data and have a number of requirements related to the formats and other technical aspects of data delivery. Communication and users' support need to be continuously reviewed and upgraded to meet these requirements. The technology provides many possibilities to meet better the increasing customer requirements, such as web services, e-books, print-on-demand, online delivery, customised products, etc.

17. With regard to web-based information services, delegates stressed the importance of including comprehensive metadata in a clear and understandable form. The role of metadata is to define what the data refer to and explain the underlying statistical methods, but also to help the user to find and obtain the information. It is also important to know the data availability, when the updates are due, whom to approach with questions, etc. It is a big challenge to write metadata in a clear and user-friendly way.

18. Concern was raised regarding the archiving of published material on Internet. In some cases, this is an additional motivation for maintaining printed publications. Some offices intend to create a long-term archive for the material published on the website. Experience shows that there is considerable interest in the older issues of regular publications and this remains quite stable. It was suggested that the archiving questions might deserve to be revisited in the future. Title management is often an overlooked issue in ensuring continuity of products over time and thus helping to locate the information later. Also, the stability of the main entry point to the statistical information (the NSO home page) is important.

19. An example was presented where the statistical organization is unifying the publications production aiming to produce printed publications, CD-ROMs and web pages from one source database. This approach allows serving equally the users who prefer to access the database, as well as those who prefer ready-made products. The simultaneous use of traditional and more advanced publishing methods is motivated by the fact that some users may be discouraged by the complexity of accessing data in on-line databases, or do not want to spend the time needed to learn to work with different systems of accessing statistical databases on the web.

20. The discussion on technical formats suitable for Internet publishing (HTML, PDF, XML, etc.) revealed that the behaviour of users as well as data providers is still developing. Studies show that users often prefer formats ready for printing and therefore the pdf-format is frequently used. However, it should be kept in mind that pdf is very impractical for presenting data tables for reuse. To enable reuse, the pdf-version has to be complemented with a link to data in a table or database format. Another concern is the possibility to search for information in pdf-format documents. The more widespread Internet search engines are already indexing pdf-documents but this possibility is still not very widely developed. A more advanced feature is a product that allows creating print formats “on the fly” thus meeting both the criteria for print-ready and up-to-date material. However, there is a considerable workload involved in maintaining different dissemination formats simultaneously.

21. Several offices are currently reviewing their publication strategies. The presentations provided many examples of what considerations are taken into account in reviewing the compendium publications. Developing new dissemination channels and vehicles often requires cutting back resources to produce print publications. This makes it necessary to carefully review the publications and to find the most efficient ways to satisfy the customer demand. The product development and marketing strategies need to encounter the challenges. The compendium publications will survive if they succeed in adding value for their customers.

22. The future of printed statistical publications includes the trend towards “lighter” publications as opposed to former “data heavy” publications, increased proportion of annual reference publications in comparison to quarterly and monthly releases, and the appearance of books and booklets focusing on commentary and analysis that also provide links to more detailed data on the web. Some participants found that the number of journals is decreasing, while on the other hand, there is a trend toward bundling content into regular series.

23. There seems to be a continuing demand for statistical yearbooks. Statistical offices, in general, have an on-going interest to maintain them as flagship publications even though the sales revenue often does not cover the production costs. However, the presentational role that the flagship publications often have is being taken over by the NSO home page. Having a well-designed and well-functioning homepage is good for the image of the NSO. It shows that the statistical office is at the forefront of technology, which helps to challenge the image of a slow conservative organization.

24. Moving away from print products also implies the psychological change in the attitude of dissemination staff: replacing a “tangible”, finished product with a more virtual product on Internet that is in a constant stage of updating and never ready. However, this change can be rewarding because of the increasing number of customers on Internet. Seeing how other agencies/departments are successful in web dissemination provides an additional incentive to follow the trend and not to be left behind in development.

25. With the move towards focusing on electronic products, the style of communication is changing toward more web-like products: shorter text and summaries providing links to more detailed data in tables and databases. The style of writing evolves to become more user-friendly, “chatty”, complemented with visual material, like graphs, maps, pictures, etc. There was concern that the style might become too “chatty” and thus be perceived as non-professional. It is difficult to be rigorous, precise, clear and simple at the same time. However, feedback from users shows that they seem to like the new, more colloquial style of communicating statistics.

26. The participants agreed that on-line publications were taking over from printed publications, but there was still a role for paper publications as long as there was a demand from the readership. For example, in the United States the legal community is an important user of the printed version of publications. The number of readers of paper products is slowly but steadily decreasing while the number of on-line clients is much bigger and increasing. Sometimes the availability of the electronic products also drives up the demand for the same title in paper format. The development is moving toward systems of products, each one designed for a specific audience or a specific task. The share of self-services in finding data is increasing as opposed to ready-made

products.

III. How to train and educate statisticians to tell the story behind the numbers

Documentation: Invited papers by, Denmark, Norway and United Kingdom; supporting papers by United Kingdom (2 papers).

Session organizer: Vicki Crompton (Canada).

27. Statistical professionalism and communication expertise are equally important when disseminating statistical information. Different strategies are used to promote a better communication culture in statistical offices. These include training courses, on-the-job training and promoting dialogue between statisticians and journalists. Some offices suggest considering communication skills as an additional (or even necessary) qualification in recruiting statisticians. Several examples were presented of how statistical offices train their staff to communicate better and be more efficient in their contacts with the media and general public.

28. One of the most widespread courses are the writing courses that teach how to write effective news releases: how to identify the storyline, concentrate on the main message in the data, focus on causes and effects, relate to people's everyday lives, etc. An effective news release gives journalists something to write about and increases the chance of being directly and correctly quoted. The courses often include case studies, hands-on exercises and analysis of what works and what does not work in writing for the media. Special media courses are also held to train statisticians on how to speak to the media and to communicate effectively through interviews. Some offices have special courses on specific aspects of statistical dissemination, such as writing for the web, press relations, storytelling, etc.

29. It was stressed that the development of Internet has resulted in information being available to everyone from a wide variety of sources. To remain competitive in this environment, the national statistical offices should be distinguishable by the quality of their data and should communicate in the clearest possible language to the widest possible audience. Bare facts work only for a specific tiny (although perceived to be important) audience.

30. The media should be regarded as an opportunity, not as a problem. The interests of the media and statistical offices are different: the media are more commercially oriented, while statisticians focus on the quality of the information. However, when trying to understand the viewpoint of the media and preparing the statistical output in a way that is appealing to them, statisticians considerably increase the chances of getting their information published. The change toward more effective statistical communication can be managed better by making it quantitatively visible: measuring media coverage and relating it directly to each publication and each statistical division.

31. Statisticians can learn from journalists how to write clearly and simply and how to find a good story. By adopting a similar style, statistical agencies may get more attention from the media, and ensure that the information is correctly interpreted. Leaving the task of telling the story behind the figures entirely to journalists increases the risk of being misinterpreted, or not being noticed at all. A good way to learn to prepare better news releases can be via an on-going dialogue between the subject matter statisticians and communication specialists where the communication specialist suggests improvements to the text prepared by statisticians.

33. Changing the style of communication also helps statisticians make their work more enjoyable and rewarding. Statisticians often are afraid to become the centre of attention, they try to avoid the limelight and hide behind the numbers. The courses can help statisticians to enjoy writing and to make them aware of their skills. Analysing the data from a "storytelling" viewpoint can often provide new insights into the data for the statistician.

34. The use of stories prepared by statistical offices can differ in countries. In some cases, journalists prefer

to write their own story because it can be considered unethical to take over a text authored by the statistical office. In other countries the text from the press releases is commonly used. This may also depend on the quality of the story. A well written, interesting story that clearly relates to the everyday life of people has a better chance of being taken up by the media.

35. The boundary between the objectivity of statistics and political commentary is not so clear. It differs in countries depending on the long-term tradition and culture of disseminating statistics. In some countries, the head of the statistical office may comment on and analyse the released data while in others they have to limit strictly to what can be directly concluded from the numbers. The choice and personality of the spokespersons is very important. In several countries the spokespersons receive special training before they are “accredited” to speak to the media, as they are important for promoting the corporate brand of official statistics and can strongly influence the reputation of the office.
