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Topic IV: Improving data dissemination strategies

REFLECTIONS ABOUT DATA DISSEMINATION BY STATISTICAL AGENCIES

Invited paper

Submitted by the Federal Statistical Office, Germany¹

SUMMARY

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Besides data collection and production, data dissemination is a basic task of all statistical agencies. In times of cuts in the budgets of nearly all statistical offices and the competition with private services, data dissemination gains in importance, as it is the point where the statistician comes in contact with his user and financier. In addition, data dissemination obviously is a measure for the statistician's work. In discussions about statistical offices these effects lead to a call for more output orientation. Without any doubt, statisticians have to attach more importance to users' needs, but one must keep in mind that there could not be a good data dissemination without proper data collection and production and vice versa.

2. The paper about data dissemination strategy consists of two parts, the first is an attempt to provide an abstract model of data dissemination and the second shows some experiences in that field in the Federal Statistical Office of Germany.

II. DATA DISSEMINATION AS A PROCESS

3. In the following, data dissemination as a production process, by which statistical agencies produce **data** and **disseminate** them to **users** will be reviewed. The goods produced by the statistical agency in that sense are not

¹ Prepared by Ernst Schrey.

only the data itself, but also the way in which the data are distributed to the user (services). It is obvious that there are many different types of users (journalists, enterprises, ministries, scientists) and the kinds of data they want (tables, charts, microdata, even statistical expertise might be seen as "data"), as well as the media to be used for the dissemination (paper, telephone, diskettes, CD-ROM or online transmission). In addition, users have very different characteristics concerning technical know-how and equipment, financial power, knowledge about statistics and the time frame they want to receive the data.

4. Based on these elements, the data dissemination strategy and the decision about the production process necessitates a decision on a **bundle of products**, the **media** and **techniques** and tools to produce and disseminate it and a consistent **system of formation of prices**. This has to be done under the condition that the benefit function is maximised when considering criteria such as the characteristics and needs of the users, the needs of the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) e.g. low cost of production and legal regulations. The benefit function should be fixed before, that means that a "political" decision has to be taken about the weights of the different criteria mentioned above. It is obvious, therefore, that some criteria are in contradiction to others (for example, the interest of the user in low prices and the wish to raise the receipts of the NSI).

III. EXPERIENCES IN THE FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE

5. In the past, some of the above-mentioned criteria and conditions changed. The technical equipment of the users has also changed in computing power and the software available. The telecommunication connection between the user and statistical offices became very easy and is nearly "standardised" by the Internet. The NSIs are obliged to lower the cost of production and to raise their receipts. The requirements from scientists to acquire access to microdata are increasing compared with the past.

6. As an illustration of the above reflections about the data dissemination strategy, seven examples of "products" will be discussed which are reactions to these changes; the considerations which led to their development will be described and some hints given to particular properties. They are:

- Timeseries-service (access to mainframe-based timeseries-databases via Internet),
- Konjunktur Aktuell (replacement of a printed publication about analysis of current business cycles by a Internet-based one),
- Internet-Shop (pilot-project on electronic commerce),
- Distribution of press releases by a broadcast-system,
- Factual anonymous data - delivery of microdata to scientists,
- "Access" to microdata - co-operation with scientists by an exchange of the software-code,
- Development of an integrated system for the production of publications.

These examples have been selected from different fields to show the broad range of data dissemination activities and what challenges the statistician has to face.