

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Meeting of the 2017/2018 Bureau  
Helsinki (Finland), 13-14 February 2018

For discussion and  
recommendations

Item VII (b) of the Provisional  
Agenda

**OUTLINE FOR THE CES 2018 SEMINAR ON  
“GETTING OUR MESSAGE ACROSS: STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS ON  
MODERNIZING STATISTICAL COMMUNICATION”**

**Prepared by Albania, Mexico, Montenegro, the Netherlands and the Secretariat**

*This paper presents the draft outline of the seminar on “Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication” to be held during the CES 2018 plenary session. **The Bureau is invited to discuss and provide recommendations on the organization of the seminar.***

**I. BACKGROUND**

1. At the 2017 plenary session, the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) selected the topic “Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication” for one of the CES seminars to be held in 2018. The organisation of the seminar will be coordinated by Albania, Mexico, Montenegro and the Netherlands.
2. In an increasingly competitive environment, an effective communications strategy is now essential for maintaining the relevance of official statistics. This has been recognised in a number of forums, including most recently the Strategic Communications Framework project sponsored by the High Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics.
3. National statistical authorities should remain the trusted source to whom to turn when questioning the factual basis of news relying on statistics. On the other hand, it is also important to address the question of how far can official statisticians ensure effective communication while preserving impartiality.
4. The purpose of the seminar is to discuss the challenges national statistical offices (NSOs) face in modernizing communication in the current environment. These include how statistical organizations need to change their communication strategies to ensure that they connect effectively and efficiently with citizens. Effective communication is essential for maintaining the relevance of official statistics and maximizing our value to society.
5. The following countries and organisations offered to contribute papers to the seminar at the CES plenary session in June 2017: Australia, Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United States and OECD.

## **II. STRUCTURE OF THE SEMINAR**

6. The opening and introduction of the seminar will be conducted by Ms. Delina Ibrahimaj, Director General of Institute of Statistics Albania.

7. The seminar will consist of two sessions. The first session will focus on strategic communications, and the second one on communication crises - issue and reputation management. A tentative timetable for the session is provided in Annex 1.

### **A. Session 1: Strategic communications**

8. The session will be organized by Mexico and Montenegro. Mr Mike Ackermans, Statistics Netherlands, will give a keynote presentation. The keynote presentation will include lively examples and best practice from recent and successful communication strategies and activities. It will also include a live cross to the CBS Live Studio where a journalist will provide an external perspective.

9. The discussion will focus on the following aspects:

- Modernising communication strategies in statistical offices
- The effect of post truth era on communication strategies

10. The session will rely on contributions from Belgium, Croatia, Israel, Netherlands, Norway and OECD (see Annex 2).

### **B. Session 2: Communication crises - issue and reputation management**

11. The session will be organized by the Netherlands. Mr David Kalisch, Australian Bureau of Statistics, will give a keynote presentation related to their experience with the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey in late 2017. On such a sensitive and emotive issue, and following some process issues with the 2016 Census, the keynote speech will discuss how the ABS used communications and the survey process to successfully deliver the marriage survey, with results trusted by the community and the Australian Parliament.

12. The discussion will focus on the following aspects:

- Building trust in official statistics through communications
- Responding to communication issues effectively

13. The session will rely on contributions from Australia, Germany, Sweden, and United States of America (see Annex 2).

## **III. ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING OF THE SEMINAR**

14. Sessions 1 and 2 will both begin with an introduction to the topic by the session organiser. The sessions will include a keynote presentation that highlights one country's experience, followed by presentation by the session organizer on the key issues raised in the papers. For a more dynamic interaction, a system to vote and answer questions will be used. The countries and organizations that authored the papers will then provide brief comments on issues from their papers, after which the floor will be opened for a general discussion. A tentative timetable is presented in Annex 1.

**ANNEX 1 TENTATIVE TIMETABLE**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Presenter/ moderator</b>
10'	Introduction by Seminar Chair	Albania
1h40'	<b>Session 1: Strategic communications</b>	
10'	Introduction by Session Organizer	Mexico / Montenegro
30'	Key note speech – Statistics Netherlands	Netherlands
25'	Key issues identified in papers and comments by countries and organizations who prepared papers	Mexico / Montenegro
30'	General discussion	
5'	Summary of the session	Mexico / Montenegro
1h 30'	<b>Session 2: Communication crises - issue and reputation management</b>	
10'	Introduction by Session Organizer	Netherlands
20'	Key note speech – Australian Bureau of Statistics	Australia
25'	Key issues identified in papers and comments by countries and organizations who prepared papers	Netherlands
30'	General discussion	
5'	Summary of the session	Netherlands
10'	Conclusion of the Seminar	Albania

3h30' in total

## ANNEX 2 - ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS

### Session 1: Strategic communications

***Keynote: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication  
(Netherlands)***

1. **Strategic reorientation: why are we here for?** NSI's role in society is finding out *what is actually happening* by making statistics on all important themes in society. However, it doesn't end there. At Statistic Netherlands (CBS) we asked ourselves: what is the use of statistics if nobody is using them? If they do not even reach civilians, users in society? Dissemination should not be a *passive* act, by just throwing data out of the window by means of press releases and a website. It should be done actively. Too many things we make and do end up in drawers gathering dust... Make sure statistics are seen, understood and used!

2. **New strategy, new organization** First, we learned from news media and organized our dissemination in the way they do. We introduced storytelling techniques, acknowledged the importance of the image in modern communications (video!) and gave communications a role right from the start in the overall process of creating statistics and creating the stories about them. Second, we started working together with news media in order to reach the public in a massive way. We positioned ourselves as partners for newspapers, online news platforms and radio & tv-news shows and even as co-producers. Since NSI's and news media have similar targets, finding out what happens and informing the public about it, this new role was quickly acknowledged by Dutch the press. We adjusted our release times, bringing them to publisher-friendly times (mostly short after midnight) and started with pre-release under embargo of news productions (non-sensitive). Third, we did not forget other target audiences. The academic world, education, public office, businesses: we targeted them directly with our new ways of communication like social media.

3. **The results** Reach and impact increased dramatically (graphs). We increased output, developed state-of-the-art multimedia formats, raised availability of our dedicated spokespeople (researchers trained for radio/tv/media exposure) and made sure news media covered CBS-data and stories on a daily basis. (examples).

4. **If you stick your neck out** you take the risk of getting decapitated. What did the dramatically increased visibility of Statistics Netherlands do to the public opinion? Was the reputation of the institute challenged in one way or another? How did media react, did they perceive Statistic Netherlands as *a new kid on the block* or as the partner we meant to be? The key note elaborates on these questions, using answers from media, journalists and others.

***Transforming a new communication strategy into the production of news and stories  
(Belgium)***

5. Beginning of 2018, Statistics Belgium started to radically change and improve its services to the broader public. This change was due to several strategic choices that were made throughout 2016 and 2017. These strategic decisions were taken to:

- a) Enhance the visibility of Statistics Belgium
- b) Emphasize the professional independency of Statistics Belgium

c) Make Statistics Belgium a more user-centered and news-oriented organization

6. Even though Statistics Belgium already could regularly see broad media coverage of its releases, it is aiming to make its communication even more proactive and easy to access. Official figures are important not only for researchers and policy makers, but also for a broader public. We cannot exclusively rely on journalists, newspapers and tv-stations to make sure that these statistics make it to a general public; we have to reach out to citizens directly.

7. Therefore, Statistics Belgium is developing several new products and projects to enhance direct communication between Statistics Belgium and Belgian citizens. Among these products and projects are:

- a) A new, independent and completely news-centered website;
- b) A series of analyses on specific topics linking several datasets, or highlighting the expertise of our statisticians and methodologists, published in an easy to use format and in an easy to understand language, possibly accompanied by related apps or mini-websites;
- c) Several easy-to-use applications. First example: an application focusing on the local elections in Belgium, in October 2018. It gives, in the form of a dashboard, a quick insight and overview of all figures available on the municipal level in Belgium.

***Is there a need for communication makeover in statistical offices? (Croatia)***

8. For decades, statistical offices have been collecting, producing and disseminating official statistical data. Changes in modern society have shifted focus to the sphere where it is expected that official statistics communicate not only data and information, but also their value, which should be in line with the vision, purpose and the defined strategic goals. Digital age has facilitated access to data and altered not only how we get information but also the speed of its spreading, which is limited only by how fast people can click or type. Furthermore, digital channels have provided two-way communication in real time and allowed users to engage with statistical offices easily.

9. The way in which statistical offices express themselves and perception of their tasks, roles and limitations, can hold them back, but at the same time, can influence their image, reputation and visibility among stakeholders, users and the general public. That is the paradox of communication – it can help us and harm us simultaneously, depending on how we use it. Statistical offices need to be good communicators, need to know what they want to communicate and how, but at the same time they need to listen what audience wants.

10. The content has become king and data storytelling queen of our statistical story, both of them are being increasingly communicated through digital visual means that are evolving on a daily basis. The written word is being transformed as new digital tools and different channels are emerging and changing our communication landscape.

11. If we want to be in line with current communication trends, we need to reorganise the process of preparing releases. Organising modern communication requires flexibility and openness, as well as cooperation with a broad range of organizational units. Communication of official statistics is more than writing press releases, answering to users' questions and requests. If communication officers, and above all, management of statistical offices want to live happily ever after, they should be aware that statistical offices need a modern, proactive communication strategy with clearly defined key messages and a list of communication

tactics for different target groups on different communication channels. Modern communication strategy is a living document that should be reviewed periodically – in accordance with the strategic plan, future activities and the best practices used by others. Being strategic is a state of mind and understanding the importance of communication is what really makes the difference.

***«We need to get them young» Millennials, and why NSIs communications strategies should focus on achieving a stronger presence in schools and universities (Norway)***

12. It is, and will be, increasingly challenging for national statistical institutions (NSIs) to develop communications strategies with a lifespan of more than a year or two with a complementing set of KPIs (Key performance indicators) to measure if strategic goals are met or not.

13. Specific goals in terms of meeting user needs, disseminating statistics on the platforms users are, tailoring content to specific user groups – typically media, different type of expert users etc. – may quickly become irrelevant at new dissemination channels, new technology or new user behavior become prevalent.

14. Traditional KPIs such as the number of visits on the NSI websites, user surveys determining user needs and level of satisfaction, media reach, Facebook reach etc. will in all likelihood become obsolete or less relevant in the coming years. Google increasingly offers users the statistics and facts they are searching for directly rather than just providing the link to the NSI website. People will increasingly use dissemination services outside the NSI websites based on NSI open data solutions. Traditional media is in decline while people increasingly get their news from blogs, social media, youtube and podcasts.

15. Millennials (people born from the early 1980s to the late 1990s) are characterized by their increased use and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies. Research show that they prefer:

- d) News from social media and blogs, and that they do not read traditional newspapers or listen to or watch news shows
- e) To interact with public institutions via social media accounts or chats, not phone or e-mail, and they expect fast response around the clock

16. The NSIs websites and traditional media will not necessarily be the primary channels of the dissemination of statistics in a few years. To meet the demands of millennials, we will become increasingly adept in disseminating statistics via Facebook and other social media channels, creating our own Youtube channels and podcasts, providing our data in all the relevant formats, using artificial intelligence based software to respond to queries etc.

17. Yet, we will increasingly be at the mercy of algorithms, software providers, profit-optimization; all which could potentially at odds with the goals of the NSIs and the needs of society. s we can plan for is to be able to react and adapt to an ever increasing pace of changes. Yet, in the post-truth era, there is a great need for high-quality statistics and the need to inform the public about the important role of NSIs and official statistics in society

18. Modern communications strategies need to nurture flexible technological solutions and flexible organizations with competent and flexible employees, which will enable us to react and adapt to an ever changing environment. Yet in addition, we should look for ways to be

more pro-active. One possible strategic goal is to continue our efforts to reach as many as we can of future possible users while they are still in school with the aim to:

- a) Improve statistical literacy
- b) Familiarize pupils with the role of NSIs and the value official statistics in society, and make official statistics a preferred source of factual information for them as they grow up and enter the workforce
- c) Familiarize them with the importance of contributing to the production of statistics if chosen to partake in a survey (at least until all official statistics are based on big data)

19. A stronger presence in schools and institutions of higher learning will also give NSIs greater insight into the user needs and behavior of future users. This will ideally position us to make more pro-active choices in how to disseminate official statistics to future generations rather than just continuing reacting to present technological changes and the needs and expectations of the millennial generation.

### ***The role of official statistics in an evolving communication society (OECD)***

20. With the rapid evolution of the digital world in recent years, the way of communicating and retrieving information has changed dramatically in our society. People are increasingly relying on social media as their main source of information. It is therefore imperative to ensure that information shared on social media is factual, accurate and unbiased. If National Statistical Offices (NSOs) are to remain relevant, they must ensure that official statistics are present on social media, providing the factual statistical information people need to make informed decisions.

21. With this objective in mind, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) under the auspices of the Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy, organised a conference in October 2017 on the role of official statistics in an evolving communication society gathering Heads of NSOs and International Organisations with official statistical activities (IOSs), sociologists, communications experts, journalists, academics, policy experts and students. This paper will provide an overview of the key takeaways of the conference, notably as regards to knowing and adapting to new audiences, responding to alternative evidence, fostering a strong social media community, and humanising data by telling stories that speak to people. Ultimately, it is clear that NSOs and IOSs have a powerful role to play in disseminating high quality and relevant statistical data that can have an impact on society, and that bringing the statistical community together with the non-statistical community to have these discussions is a useful exercise.

### ***Abstract from Israel***

22. The abstracts from Israel will be provided by the end of January.

## **Session 2: Communication crises - issue and reputation management**

### ***Keynote: Building trust and communicating effectively: the Australian experience***

23. When it comes to the production and use of official statistics, trust is paramount. The data produced by national statistical offices provides the basis for critical decisions made by governments, businesses, communities and households.

24. Perhaps at one time statistical offices could have safely assumed this trust existed without ever having to test the supposition. No longer is this the case. The immediacy of information and the ease at which most people can access it has given rise to intense scrutiny of all aspects of government and institutions more generally. Now more than ever before in its 112-year history, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is using communications to retain and build trust and manage issues effectively. Our facts are not alternative.

25. Without question, one of the highest profile statistical undertakings that the ABS has managed was the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey in late 2017. The ABS was required to undertake a voluntary survey of all electors, asking them for their views on whether the law should be changed to allow same sex couples to marry, and produce results within 100 days. On such a sensitive and emotive issue, and following some process issues with the 2016 Census, the key note speech will discuss how the ABS used communications and the survey process to successfully deliver the marriage survey, with results trusted by the community and the Australian Parliament.

*Abstracts from Germany, Sweden, and United States of America*

26. The abstracts from Germany, Sweden, and United States of America will be provided by the end of January.

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