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NEWS RELEASES PUBLISHED ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Supporting Paper

Submitted by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. A vigorous democracy demands substantial official statistics. They are, beyond a doubt, urgently needed and widely useful for all current, high profile target audiences. However, statistics can also be used exclusively as a promotional tool among the general public while drawing attention to and providing valuable information about people's lives.
2. Objective and politically independent statistics can be an accurate mirror of society, although for discovering facts and figures in huge treasury of statistics, simple and interesting research tools have to be available to users, i.e. news releases.
3. Electronic dissemination is currently the primary postulate for exposure and a good challenge for the statistical office to establish advanced communication with different audiences, yet the media still plays perhaps the most important role.
4. The Slovenian Statistical Office for effective communication with public via media publishes news release at special occasions: when a country-wide event is taking place, e.g. holidays, national or international days, which are devoted to a specific group of people or to some activity, phenomena or appearance.
5. Press-clipping reviews for the first two releases in 2005 showed astonishingly good results, but all the same, quite vivid debate was evoked in the Slovenian Statistical Office about whether or not too much of our professional-statistical approach had been lost in the simplified texts of the press releases.

II. MEDIA AS TRANSMITTERS AND AUDIENCE

6. Apart from the important roles of official statistics as a substantial basis for a true democratic society, in decision-making processes and for the public as the arbiter of the Government's administration, statistics in themselves can and should be used as a promotional tool in the general public while offering some information to the broad audience concerning their lives or for attracting almost everyone's attention to certain details.

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7. Development of information technology in one way determines the tempo and mode of the statistical office's work, but not least does it offer an unlimited scale of opportunities to disseminate on-line statistical data and information to a vast number of users at the same moment. We might say that the 6th principle of the European Statistics Code of Practice, i.e. "all users are treated equitably", with the development of ICT can be fulfilled. Nevertheless, electronic dissemination is not only the first postulate and a good challenge for an advanced statistical office, the internet and well-organised web sites can facilitate users to find data and information with ease; we might presume that many expectations of users can be richly met. A "users' satisfaction survey" should confirm or disprove such a prevision.

8. Classifications of targeted users and dissemination channels have been precisely investigated by many statistical agencies in previous years; perhaps not much more can be added. It is a fact known to us all that the media plays perhaps the most important part: they are the "watchdogs" of democracy, they judge the work of the statistical office (i.e. its transparency of statistical process, integrity and independence) as well, and at the same time they are the transmitters of statistical information, especially to the general public. However, they take from us pertinent, up-to-date, important, interesting statistics or shocking information only.

9. The first principle of the Code of Ethics of Slovenian Journalists states that the right of the public to be informed and the right of the journalists to express their opinions can be implemented by free gathering, disseminating and transmitting information. Because of this double role of journalists, i.e. being censors of the state institution's behaviour with strong power in creating public opinion and also for simple human beings possessing limited educational background in statistics, special care in maintaining professional and open relationships with journalists is needed. The media thus can be, in a way, the most effective channel for dissemination of statistics to ordinary people.

10. Statisticians often do not anticipate that users of statistics, including journalists, lack the ability to understand statistical terminology and concepts of methodologies that accompany statistical data. Statistical thinking, which includes statistical data, data-related arguments and all kinds of statistical measures for describing the relationship between variables, is not supposed to be self-evident in the common approach of reading statistical data among ordinary users; researchers and economic analysts are certainly the exceptions. Can we say that journalists are statistically illiterate? Scarcely, reasons for publishing press releases are well-known and were documented in published manuals years ago.

11. The intention of the statistical agency is evident: user-oriented statistics are expected to be useful, widely appreciated, understandable, easy and interesting for the general public, therefore the description of "real life" would broaden the knowledge of us. Then objective and politically independent statistics is to become the mirror of the society, in which everybody can discover facts and figures about ourselves in simple and understandable sentences:

- for the general public, including media, but only if there is substantial trust in official statistics, and
- for politicians who, not so rarely, anticipate statistical output with anxiety and discomfort.

12. Despite an enormous amount of information structured in well-known fields of statistics, the usefulness of that information in abundant cyberspace on the internet is not always clear. Do we have the right to expect average users (students, researchers, economists cannot be left out) to understand the information which a statistician presents only in mathematical terms: in table, chart, percentage point, index, coefficient etc.? Should we not make the first move in publishing comprehensible texts which accompany statistical data instead of our demand that the public and journalists master substantial literacy? It is our duty to make it easier to understand and to translate, out of regard for the truth, from professional statistical language into common language.

III. SLOVENIAN NEWS RELEASES AT SPECIAL OCCASIONS

13. The Slovenian Statistical Office for effective communication with the public, via the media, publishes news releases, not only when the results of statistical surveys are prepared, but also offer an occasional release when it is assumed that some extra statistical information would be highly appreciated by the media and the public. Nevertheless, such a release covers more fields of statistics, avoiding a purely statistical-numerical approach, and provides soft, easy to understand, summarized information on the selected subject.

14. Journalists are looking for statistics whenever they want to corroborate their assumptions or just illustrate issues in articles. Sometimes press officers and statisticians as well can “predict” their needs in view of our own experiences in the past, and publish news releases for such, let us say, special occasions when something in the country is taking place, e.g. at holidays, for national or international days which are devoted to a specific group of people or some activity, phenomena or appearance.

15. In the Slovenian Statistical Office two occasional news releases were prepared last year for the first time: for international women’s day and mother’s day. After having published them on the web, the press releases were sent by e-mail to a vast number of journalists in different media: newspapers, radio, as well as electronic media and internet sources. In both cases, press-clippings brought astonishingly good results. Soon afterwards, quite lively debate was evoked in the statistical office over whether or not the texts in press releases were too simplified and if they were not “professionally statistical” enough. Nevertheless, publicity was so welcome in the Statistical Office that it was decided to launch similar news releases for the remaining “red-letter” days and holidays. In 2006 there will be around 26 releases for national and international days like Earth Day, World Communication Day, Internationally Family Day, National Farm Women Day, World Day of Post, World Truism Day, National Mountaineering Day, National Day of Culture, International Day of Older Persons etc.

16. Measuring the usefulness and popularity of those news releases, i.e. our efforts in communication with journalists, indicated that we made the right choice generally speaking. However, in some cases we should incorporate more fresh data (unfortunately not available at the time) and interpret in a more broad aspect by including even more different statistical fields in one release. But for some releases, there was no perceived interest, because we actually missed the content. For example, in a release for World Environment Day, in which we wrote about lack of water, the media was mostly interested in air quality. Those releases were and still are mostly used by journalists as supplementary sources in their articles, but often the whole release can be published. We have noticed lately that releases are perhaps the most popular among radio journalists who use the contents for connecting short messages between music and serious broadcastings.

17. Writing news releases at special occasions involves the statistician and public relations officer. For both of them indispensable patience is required to achieve an end in which the compromised result for stakeholders (statistician, PR-officer) and audiences (media, public) can be more or less satisfied. As those releases are written for the web, fundamental principles for writing on the web are rather taken into account; however there is still room for improvement. We should admit frankly: this is not an easy task for statisticians, yet they are rewarded with satisfaction and self-promotion afterwards. The author of such a release is exposed for further explanations or more detailed statistics and, for that very reason, preparing a release gives much pleasure to statisticians.

18. When a news release is published on the web, e-mails to journalists are sent with a very short introduction to the release and the link to its web site, where the news release is published. Sometimes, part of or the entire release is published in the media, otherwise a journalist asks for an interview with the statistician.

19. The structure of special news releases is now more or less fixed: the title should tell the purpose of the release followed by a short summary of no more than two sentences; it includes content with subheadings, without methodological explanations or notes, written in simplified language, no table and perhaps one graph; these releases are not always bilingual.

20. The purpose of publishing those news releases is manifested in the Slovenian Statistical Office by at least a two-fold aim:

- promotion of official statistics among the general public via media while enhancing good relationship with journalists, and
- encouraging statisticians to write commentaries to statistical data in a more easily understood and pleasing way.

21. Media responses to special news releases are most frequently significantly positive. In the past year, journalists have become accustomed to them, sometimes even asking us for the release before the certain devoted day is to take place. We may conclude that journalists are satisfied with our approach; moreover, they judge the Slovenian Statistical Office, in a sense, as a sufficiently open institution.