

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

UNECE Work Session on Communication and Dissemination of Statistics
(13-15 May 2009, Warsaw, Poland)

Topic - Working with the media

PROACTIVE MEDIA – WORKING WITH THE BBC

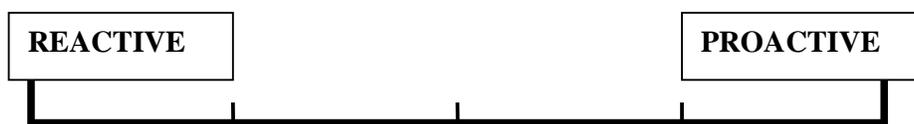
Submitted by Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Models for Media Relations operations usually fit within a spectrum ranging from wholly ‘reactive’ to mainly ‘proactive’. A ‘reactive’ model deals mainly with the day-to-day traffic of media enquiries about the statistics that are published; providing added value as requested. This is a sound, safe, conservative or cautious model designed to avoid possible controversy and quickly mop-up any mishaps.

2. A ‘proactive’ model sees an institute, through its media relations officers, develop closer relationships with the media and actively seek out opportunities for the statistics being produced to be accurately reported widely in various media reaching the widest possible public audience. This model raises an institute’s profile substantially in the media and public eye, means statistics are more widely used and appreciated. At the same time, it runs risks for institutes that they may be seen to be trying to set a political agenda, and mistakes, when they happen, are written large for all to see. This can make naturally cautious statisticians nervous.

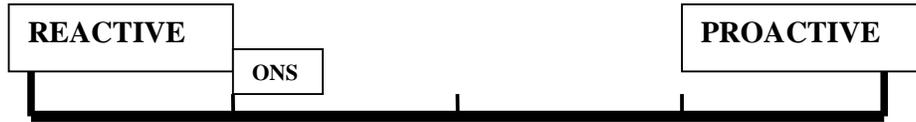
3. It is the choice of individual institutes where they place themselves on this spectrum.



4. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) traditionally offers a mix. Statistics are disseminated neutrally and the Media Relations Office (MRO) responds to questions from the media as they arise. On occasion, the MRO makes a greater effort to promote particular statistical publications in the media – primarily to the written media (national newspapers, of which there are several in the UK with differing editorial styles). This operational model puts ONS towards the largely ‘reactive’ end of the scale.

¹ Prepared by David Marder.

5.



6. This (diagram above) is probably where most institutes across the world would place themselves although there will be times – such as Censuses – when there will be very heavy amounts of proactive work. It is a respectable place to be when operations run smoothly. However, in the UK a number of factors have conspired to create a situation of substantial public mistrust of most official statistics – it is a national trait to be sceptical and to criticise those in government and this is fuelled by a media which emphasises negative news. This is not helped by some politicians and their advisers who deliberately use narrow interpretations of certain statistics. The result is that ONS frequently finds itself on the back foot defending the quality of its statistics.

7. Trust – building trust and maintaining trust – is a fickle thing. Like reputation it takes an age to earn but a minute to destroy. Some key qualities that can build trust are quality, integrity and openness. Media Relations Offices can do little about ‘quality’. The MRO, like the public, need to trust the statisticians to do their job well. But, what MRO can do is influence the way statistics are perceived in the media – and through the media you reach a wider public audience.

8. Openness and ‘visibility’ is a key path to greater trust. People are more likely to trust the statistics if they see or hear reliable and authoritative people talking honestly about what the statistics mean for the everyday lives of you and me. They recognise the name of the institution and the person representing it and recognition is a big step in earning trust.

9. ONS is now treading this path to move their position on the scale from largely reactive, to mainly proactive.



II. COURTING THE BBC

A. Convincing senior management

10. Becoming proactive isn't easy. You can't just decide one morning – ‘today we're going to be proactive’. It's not a simple change of process – although of course process will change – it is a change of culture. It is about changing the way an organisation and all the people who make it up perceive the way they work and the way people from the outside see them. There is a change from ‘creating statistics’ to

providing the foundation information that measures the economy and helps society develop – an enthusiastic producer of statistics that have meaning to all sorts of people.

11. The proactive media model involves developing stronger relationships with the media. This does not mean throwing caution to the wind in dealing with media nor does it mean giving preferential access to sections of the media. This would be counter to our Code of Practice for Official Statistics and the spirit of the UN Fundamental Principles.

12. The principle of equal access to everyone remains fundamental and all new data will be disseminated in the same strict way. But we will be upping-our-game in how we communicate the story to the media. We are in the process of reassessing and re-segmenting our media stakeholder media. The media sector is growing larger, more diverse and, in some ways, more difficult to reach. We need staff who are constantly on the ball to map the rapid changes in the media and the opportunities and threats these create.

13. We need to examine how we can use new social and online media while not neglecting our more traditional broadcast and written media stakeholders. ‘Social media’ is a particularly difficult channel to evaluate and seems to go through monthly fads . . . YouTube, Facebook and the latest vogue system (at the time of writing) Twitter. How use such channels effectively is a whole other paper!

14. Nevertheless, there are five key actions that apply to any proactive media strategy:

- a) Think about where your story can best be told – select the right media for your organisation and target the most likely to be effective.
- b) Target specific journalists and commentators – but, as above, make sure the list is manageable.
- c) Build personal but professional relationships with your core targets – deal with them face-to-face when you can and even if you can’t meet them, contact them at least once every two months and tell them what is happening with your institute
- d) Thank them if they write well about your material and don’t complain when they don’t write about you!
- e) Finally, when they criticise you fairly, don’t complain but take note; do something positive and tell them what you have done. If the criticism is unfair respond promptly and politely to put matters right

15. Looking at selecting the right media, ONS’s key relationship will be through the BBC. In the UK 75 per cent of people say they get their news via broadcast media – mainly television. Traditionally ONS has concentrated most of its media effort on the influential heavyweight national written media. The UK has many of these which have long histories of setting the news agenda – The Times, The Daily Telegraph, Guardian, Financial Times, The Independent and Daily Mail. However, it is clear that such written media – certainly in its printed paper format – is in serious decline and

no longer commands big audiences. It does, however, still have a role setting the news agenda but even this is being undermined by broadcasters, bloggers and celebrity culture.

16. ONS will continue to develop and improve relationships with the written media, but with limited resource, the most impact can be achieved by focusing most effort on the BBC.

17. Why the BBC? It is not difficult to see that BBC has a massive audience reach that involves diverse media channels – TV, national radio, online, and regional radio as well as internationally. As a public service broadcaster it has to present news impartially and has a duty both to inform and educate. It enjoys a level of trust among its audience that is the envy of any news organisation. Therefore it is the natural partner of choice for ONS to raise its profile.

18. Increased use of ONS statistics (properly credited) on the main news channels and online is a massive boost to the credibility and reputation of ONS. Raising ONS profile is a first and vital step in building trust in official statistics for the wider audience.

19. BBC Online is one of the most visited news websites in the world and has earned a deserved level of respect and trust to the extent that in the UK it is becoming a ‘journal of record’. Most people in the UK now have access to the internet at work, and they turn to BBC News Online to keep in touch with what is happening in the world. Stories that feature ONS statistics and graphics are frequently to the fore and importantly BBC always provide links directly to the ONS website from their story page.

20. This latter point is a key consideration. The web is the front door for ONS. Soon all ONS data will be presented via the web with paper confined largely to history. Therefore it is important that users are directed to the website at every possible opportunity.

B. Some early successes with the BBC

21. The sudden and dramatic downturn in the world economy threw very sharp focus on the ONS’s economic data and media coverage has grown exponentially in the past year. Inevitably, this exposed some areas to criticism. One of the first was ‘inflation’, where ONS was accused of severely underestimating the rate. In a precursor to the full strategy, ONS moved on to the front foot to try to explain how ‘inflation’ data were an average and that inflation affected individuals in different ways according to their circumstances and spending patterns.

22. ONS had already launched its ‘personal inflation calculator’ as an interactive web feature and attracted media and public attention. However, work with the BBC encouraged them to ask if the calculator could be used on the BBC website too. This substantially helped get our message across about the more complex ‘inflation’ story and the BBC actively promoted it through their general news output on television and online. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7669072.stm>

23. Our one concern was that there was not sufficient ONS branding around the calculator on the BBC website although they did provide links and credited ONS with developing the calculator.

24. A key part of being proactive is adopting a mindset of making yourself available to work with the media. At ONS we are identifying our best spokespeople and creating a core group of 'ambassadors'. We set up a meeting between our National Statistician, the Chief Economist and several senior journalists from the BBC Economics Unit and offered to talk about the data on release and, importantly, to attempt to put them into the context of the wider economic picture.

25. Subsequently, for most of the key economic releases we have provided a senior statistician to appear on the BBC News Channel at 9.30am (immediately after the release of the data) who is able to talk about the data and the impartial context without being drawn on political implications before government ministers have time to apply their interpretation.

26. Follow-up radio interviews are then repeated on news bulletins for the rest of the day across the BBC news network. Media Officers 'sell-in' our interviewees for news programmes. At the moment success in getting take-up with non-BBC news networks has been patchy but the proactive strategy sees us building relationship with other broadcasters as well as the BBC in due course.

27. The next steps with the BBC will be to build a stronger relationship with the social correspondents who cover demography, population and health statistics.

C. Getting internal 'buy-in'

28. As discussed above, no proactive strategy can work unless you take your own organisation with you on the journey. An internal workshop was organised to brainstorm ideas about how we could best interact with the BBC. We posed three questions:

- a) How can we present the story better?
- b) How can we contribute to the bigger picture?
- c) How can we use the opportunities that such outreach gives us – what are the potential threats?

29. Listed here are some of the key points that emerged:

- Focus on people
- Provide a range of products to meet user needs
- Build in more time for commentary
- Improve accessibility and 'visualisation'
- Better presentation and clarity with simple correct language
- Flexibility to meet changes in media interest

30. A few risks and issues were identified too:

- Maintaining independence and setting the right agenda
- Demarcation – who should do what
- Making sure ONS is properly credited
- Selective use of figure

31. There is inevitably some resistance to the risks of pushing yourself too far into the limelight and ONS constantly needs to re-examine its strategic position and ask ‘is this where we want to be?’

32. The position that the proactive strategy is aiming for is not one of ‘shouting from the rafters’ and neither is it one of ‘whispering vainly from the shadows’. Where we want to be is ‘standing in the sunlight and confidently and authoritatively speaking about the statistics we produce’.

33. Links to BBC coverage from early proactive work:

Personal Inflation Calculator

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7669072.stm>

Social Trends

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7999922.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7999579.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8000924.stm>

How inflation is calculated (article by ONS official on the BBC site)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7607930.stm>

BBC Recession Tracker presents ONS data

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7789784.stm>

Home editor uses ONS mapping to illustrate his blog:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2009/04/map_of_the_week_young_victims.html