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- (iv) Managing credibility in good times and in bad

REPUTATION, TRUST AND STATISTICS
What do the surveys really mean?

Submitted by Statistics Norway, Norway¹

I. REPUTATION ON THE AGENDA

1. In recent years, businesses, institutions, organisations and local authorities have all had a major focus on their reputation, and reputation surveys have become a part of the normal working day in Norway.
2. For the past five years, Statistics Norway has taken part in Synovate's reputation survey; the so-called profile survey, where a selection of respondents aged 15 years and over are asked to give their impression of 82 government departments/agencies. The question about impression can be interpreted as a measurement of trust. Before 2006, however, the survey explicitly asked about trust in the same institutions.
3. European surveys on trust in the national statistical agencies (or rather: in the official statistics) and of estimated use of official statistics were conducted in 2007 and in 2009 as part of the regular "Eurobarometer" surveys on behalf of the European Commission. Norway is not covered in these surveys. Still it is interesting to make loose comparisons between the scores on trust from the Norwegian 2005 survey and the European survey from 2007.
4. A working group established by the OECD Committee on Statistics on measuring trust in official statistics found that several countries are carrying out or commissioning regular surveys designed to monitor trust in official statistics. National circumstances however, vary a great deal, partly depending on history, the type of statistical system in place, general trust in government and institutions, and other factors. Still, the group concludes (2010) that it might be feasible to develop a model survey of trust in NSOs.

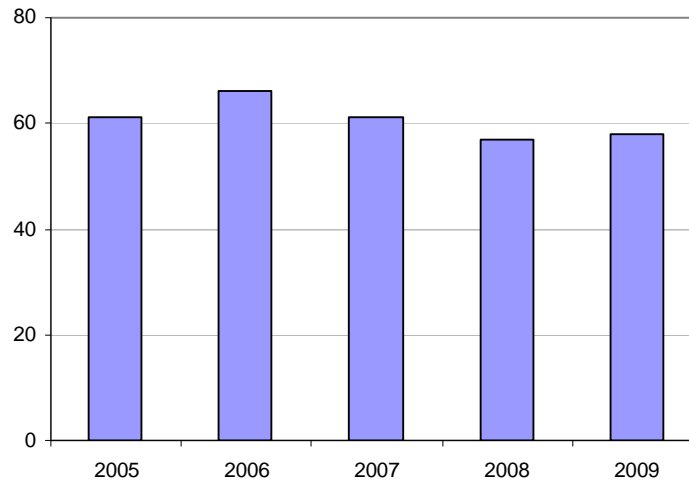
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II. STATISTICS NORWAY

A. Good impression and high ranking

5. For the past five years, Statistics Norway has taken part in Synovate’s reputation survey; the so-called profile survey, where a sample of respondents aged 15 years and over are asked to give their impression of 82 government departments/agencies. The quality of the of the survey can be debated; among the questions posed are how relevant it is to ask “people in general” for their impression of, for instance, Statistics Norway. And it must be added that a relatively large share, 39 per cent of the 860 respondents, in 2009 had no opinion on Statistics Norway.

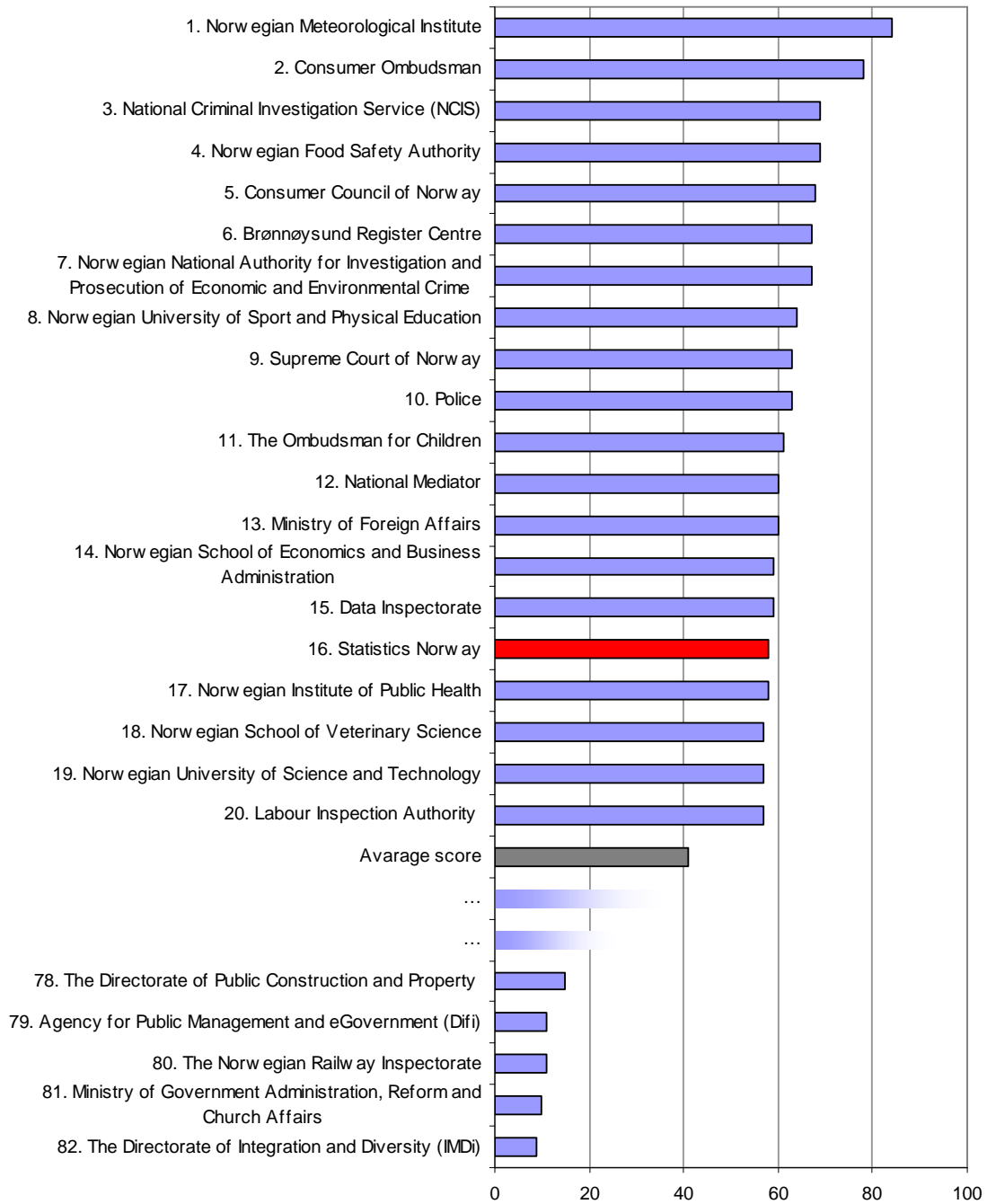
Figure 1 - The share with a ”very good” or ”fairly good” overall impression of Statistics Norway. Per cent



6. When asked about their overall impression of government agencies, around 60 per cent of respondents have every year reported having a “very good” or “fairly good” impression of Statistics Norway. In 2005, this gave us a ranking of 12, compared with this year’s shared 16th place – down from 13th place in 2008. (The average for all government agencies was 41 per cent with a good impression).

7. As previously, the top ranking was the Norwegian Meteorological Institute, with 84 per cent reporting a positive impression. This was followed by the Consumer Ombudsman, Kripos (special police division), the Norwegian Food Safety Authority and the Consumer Council of Norway.

Figure 2 - The share with a “very good” or “fairly good” overall impression of various government departments/agencies. 2009. Per cent



8. How should we interpret this? There are numerous possible perspectives, as well as a number of different ways to calculate figures.

B. Is visibility important?

9. What is the population's impression of government agencies based on? In some cases, their opinion is no doubt partly based on their own experiences and other people's experiences with the agency in question. In other cases, how the agency is presented in the media is more likely to influence their impression.

10. The agencies at the top of the rankings indicate that visibility in the media is a vital factor for forming impressions. The Norwegian Meteorological Institute has topped the list for five years in a row, and Synovate's own report refers to "The daily presence in a number of Norway's largest media channels..." and the launch of the yr.no website in 2007, as partly explaining the Institute's ranking.

11. At the other end of the scale we find relatively less visible agencies, such as the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, the Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs, the Norwegian Railway Inspectorate and the Agency for Public Management and eGovernment.

12. The population's impression of most government agencies is relatively stable from year to year. Consequently, despite the profile survey often being regarded as a superficial survey, it does appear (perhaps for that very reason?) to be robust in the sense that the responses change little from year to year².

13. The main impression certainly seems to be that Statistics Norway's score is also relatively stable. The fall in the rankings (compared with 2008) is *not* due to more people having a negative impression of Statistics Norway, but rather because other institutions have been given a higher score.

14. However, some of the changes from year to year can be interpreted as a more direct expression of changing attitudes and perceptions among the population. One example is the Police, for whom the share with a good overall impression dropped 12 percentage points from 2006 to 2009; from 75 to 63 per cent. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) also had a drop from 47 per cent in 2007 to 24 per cent in 2009. Criticism and negative media attention are likely to be key factors that can explain the fall in rankings in both these cases, although in NAV's case it can also be related to personal experiences or the experiences of others. "Visibility" may therefore be necessary, but is certainly not the only requirement for a positive impression to be formed.

15. When the share with a good overall impression of the Norwegian Directorate of Health increased from 36 to 47 per cent, this may have been related to the Directorate's role and visibility in connection with the swine flu. The Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the Norwegian Food Safety Authority also went up in the rankings. Therefore, although the year to year changes for many of the government agencies can be regarded as (minor and random) ripples, many of the more major changes must be considered to be an expression of real changes in attitudes.

C. Various ways to calculate figures

16. So far, we have only examined the total of the shares with a "very good" and "fairly good" impression. However, a large number of respondents reported a "slightly poor" or "very poor" impression of many of the institutions. With regard to Statistics Norway, however, very few have a poor overall impression; 3 per cent. Only six government agencies have a lower share. Using this method of calculation puts Statistics Norway at number 7 in the rankings.

17. If we then create an indicator we could call "net impression" by deducting the share with a negative impression from the share with a positive impression (for Statistics Norway: $58 - 3 = 55$ per cent), we move three places further up the list, to 13th place. As is often the case, the ranking depends on how the figures are calculated.

² The uncertainty is given (for the total figures) as "approx. $\pm 1.5 - 3.4$ percentage points". With regard to Statistics Norway, this means that the share with a positive overall impression is between 55 and 61 per cent.

D. More difficult to comment on...

18. In addition to questions on overall impression, the respondents were also asked about their impressions of the agencies with regard to social responsibility, efficiency and financial management, transparency and information, as well as expertise and specialist knowledge. The shares with a positive impression of the various individual areas are generally lower than for the overall impression; 51, 31, 49 and 55 per cent respectively for Statistics Norway, which corresponds to 16th, 11th, 8th and 14th place in the rankings.

Table 1 - The share with a “very good” or “fairly good” impression of Statistics Norway. 2009. Per cent

	Share	Ranking
Overall impression	58	16
Social responsibility	51	16
Efficiency and financial management	31	11
Transparency and information	49	8
Expertise and specialist knowledge	55	14

19. When the shares with a positive impression are lower here, this is not because there are many more with a negative impression, but because the share that responded “None of the above” or “Impossible to answer” is higher. Thus, a respondent can have a good overall impression of an agency, but perhaps feel it is difficult to comment on, for instance, its efficiency and financial management. Consequently, where “only” 31 per cent had a positive impression of Statistics Norway’s efficiency and financial management, we still achieved 11th place in the rankings.

20. Despite Statistics Norway’s lower score for transparency and information than for overall impression, we still managed to secure 8th place on the list since many of the other institutions have a lower score in this area. Synovate’s report quotes Statistics Norway’s publishing policy (“accessible to everyone at ssb.no”) as the reason for our high score in this indicator.

21. High earners and those living in Eastern Norway are the most likely to have a good impression of Statistics Norway. The most unlikely to share this positive view are the inhabitants of North Norway.

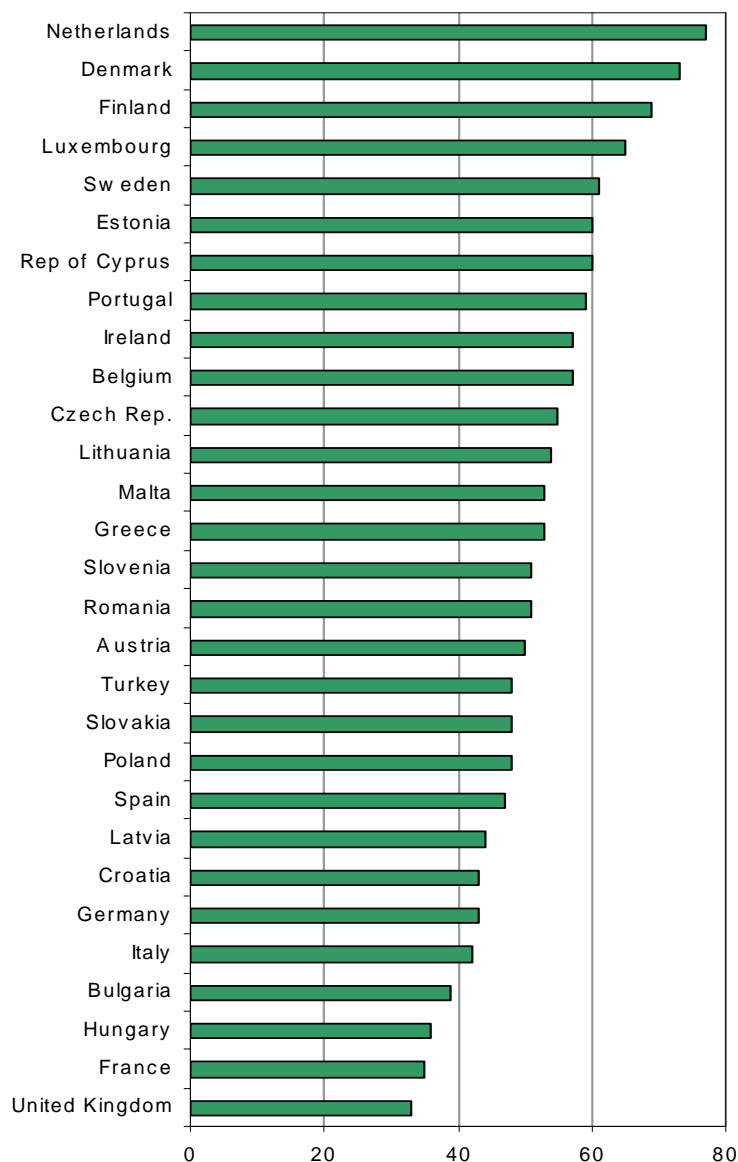
III. AROUND EUROPE

22. Although Norway did not take part in the European surveys on trust in the national statistical agencies (or rather: in the official statistics) it is nevertheless interesting to consider them. The wordings of the questions of the 2007 and the 2009 *Eurobarometer* surveys are identical, and the results are very similar. But the 2009 survey came to our attention after a first version of this paper was written. For these reasons, and also because it is more meaningful to compare the direct question on trust in the Synovate 2005 survey with the European survey closest in time, our figures and analyses below is based on the 2007 survey.

23. On the question of whether they have trust in the country’s official statistics³, less than half on average report that they tend to trust them. This share varies, however, between countries: while around three out of five in the Netherlands and Denmark say they trust the statistics, the corresponding proportion for the UK is roughly a third (perhaps not surprising) and France (possibly more surprising?). Finland and Sweden are high up the list, but Germany and Italy are both near the other end of the scale.

³ “Personally, how much trust do you have in the official statistics in (our country), for example statistics on unemployment, inflation and economic growth? Would you say that you tend to trust these official statistics or tend not to trust them?”

Figure 3 - The share who “tend to trust” official statistics. 2007. Per cent



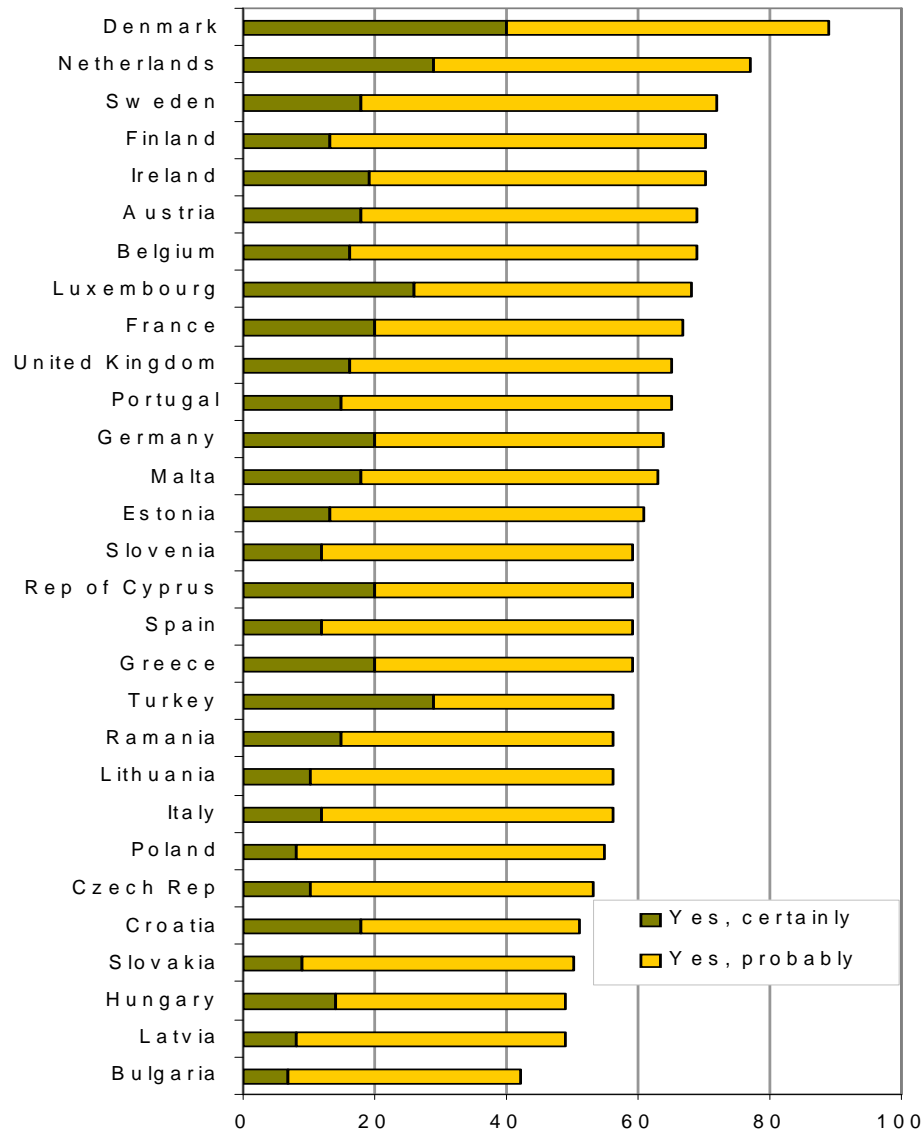
24. These figures are, of course, not in any way comparable with the shares that have a positive impression of, for instance, Statistics Norway in Synovate's survey. However, until 2005, Synovate also conducted a survey on the population's trust in various institutions. The share of respondents in this survey with “a lot” or “quite a lot” of trust in Statistics Norway was 75 per cent in the last survey (in 2005).

25. Furthermore, despite this survey not being directly comparable with the European 2007 survey, it must nevertheless be regarded as being an indicator that the trust in Statistics Norway is probably, if not *the* highest in Europe, at least among the highest.

26. Questions were also asked in the *Eurobarometer* on whether respondents believed political decisions were made based on statistical information⁴. The responses here are also widely dispersed.

⁴ “Some people say that statistical information plays an important role in business, public and political decision-making. Personally, do you think that in (our country), political decisions are made on the basis of statistical information?” The response options were: “Yes, certainly”, “Yes, probably”, “No, probably not” and “No, certainly not”.

Figure 4 - The share who believe statistics are used as a basis for political decisions. 2007. Per cent



27. If we consider the shares that gave the response “Yes, certainly” or “Yes, probably” to the question on whether statistics are used as a political basis for decision-making, once again it is, not surprisingly, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands that are at the top of the list. Perhaps more surprisingly, around two thirds of the population in the UK and France, who expressed very little trust in the figures, nevertheless believe to a large extent that statistics are used as a basis for political decisions.

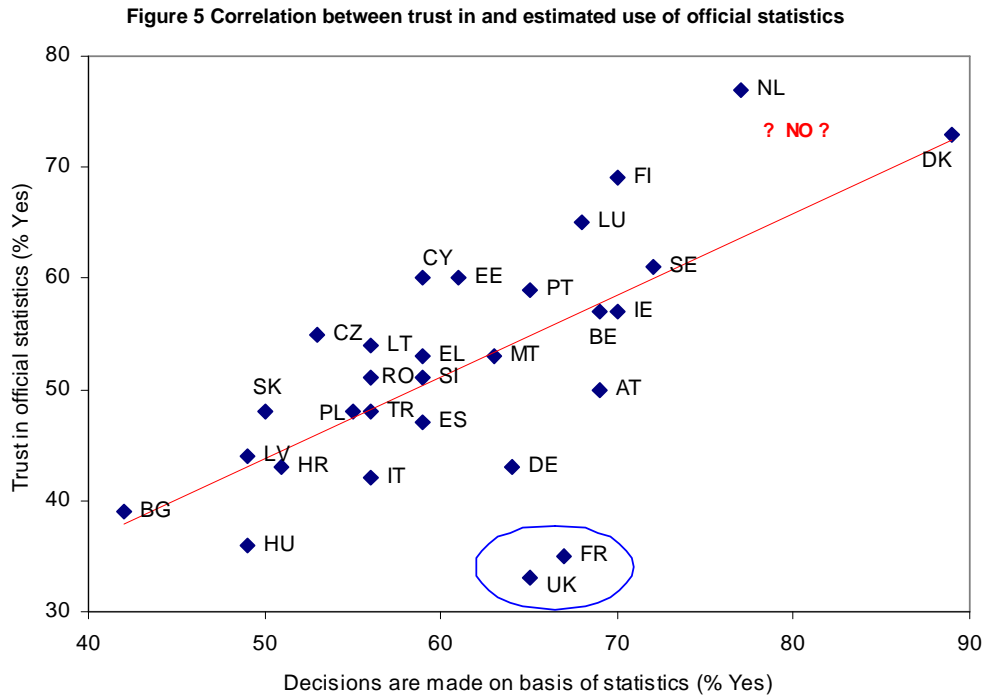
Those least likely to believe that statistics are used as a basis for political decisions are from the former Eastern bloc countries, such as Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia. Italy is also rather far down the list.

IV. TRUST AND USE

28. There is reason to believe that there is a positive correlation between the degree of trust in, and the use of official statistics, and this correlation is evident if we consider the correlation between the indicators in a so-called scatter plot ($r^2 = 0.43$).

29. Apparently, the higher the level of trust, the greater the perceived increase in the use of statistics: at the top right of the diagram we once again find the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland with a high level of trust *and* use. At the bottom left, once again we find mostly the former Eastern bloc countries. The exceptions to “the rule” can also be clearly seen; people in the UK and France (but also in Germany) have little trust in the statistics, but still believe they are used as a basis for political decisions to a relatively large degree.

30. Trying to place Norway in this picture is of course a risky business, since we don’t actually have any information on the perceptions of the Norwegian population on the use of statistics. However, if we assume that the correlation between trust (75 per cent in 2005) and use is also applicable to Norway, this would place us somewhere between Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland.



V. MEASUREMENT OF TRUST IN THE FUTURE?

31. The topic “How to monitor trust in official statistics” was discussed at the annual meeting of the OECD Committee on Statistics in June 2008. Arising out of this discussion, an electronic working group charged with developing a model survey questionnaire was established, chaired by Ivan Fellegi. The working group found that several countries are currently carrying out or commissioning regular surveys designed to monitor trust in official statistics; National circumstances however, vary a great deal, partly depending on history, the type of statistical system in place, general trust in government and institutions, and other factors. With this in mind, the group in its final report emphasizes that there is little possibility to have an international model survey of the general image of NOSs, since there is too much apparent variation between country priorities in what needs to be measured. However, it might be feasible to develop a model survey of trust in NSOs, including public awareness of the Office, and an assessment of the importance, reliability and objectivity/credibility of the statistics produced.

32. In Statistics Norway, we are interested in looking into the possibility of alternatives or supplements to the Synovate survey, and will take a closer look at the possible model survey after it has been subject to cognitive testing.

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Figure 5: Powerpoint presentation by Ivan Fellegi found on the Internet