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Session 2: Building Credibility

**A Proactive Media Strategy for Official Statistics**  
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**1. Introduction**

Statistics shape our world. Our vision in the UK is to build media and public confidence in official data. The media are an important link between the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the public. They are powerful influencers of policy.

The proactive media strategy involves setting the agenda by taking our story to journalists. Engagement improves trust in official numbers by the media and, vicariously, the wider public. Talking to journalists strengthens our reputation: good relations should, in theory, lead to better day-to-day coverage. Fostering a ‘can do’ culture also helps our reputation survive occasional bouts of negativity that invariably affect all statistical organizations. Feeding storylines and products direct to the media helps to ensure ONS statistics are reported clearly at source.

Since 2009, ONS Media Relations Office (MRO) has sought to actively promote the most newsworthy bulletins from its annual output of 400 releases and articles. MRO has also produced ‘ad hoc’ media stories to promote our numbers.

**2. Building Credibility**

We have been seeking to build better relations with journalists, promote media training and presentation, and improve the clarity of statistical outputs whilst actively promoting them to the media.

**i) Media Training**

A rolling programme of media training for statisticians has been created through a three-step process of basic, intermediate and advanced tuition. Statisticians who handle media on the phone are given basic advice on how to handle difficult calls. Those who brief print journalists face to face, or conduct pre-

recorded local radio or television interviews, are given intermediate training. Finally, senior statisticians who might represent ONS on ‘live’ national TV or radio are given intensive one-to-one tuition in broadcast interview techniques. Advanced trainees have to ‘make the grade’. They are accredited by a small panel including an MRO representative and the ONS Chief Economist. If trainees appear nervous in a pressurised mock TV interview, they are generally not selected to talk about their statistics on live broadcast outputs.

Since the project began, ONS has built up a cohort of fully trained experts who talk live on TV and radio. In some statistical areas – for instance, retail sales, labour market, and inflation - we have several accredited spokespeople. This allows us to simultaneously offer up interviewees to competing TV/ radio channels when we publish our numbers at 09.30hrs on the day of a release.

Statisticians now deliver ‘live’ monthly TV interviews on key ONS outputs including GDP, the labour market, inflation, and retail sales. They are often asked to break the numbers live on news programmes at 09.30hrs. More than 100 ONS statisticians have received media training since 2009.

Regular contact has been established with the UK’s five biggest news broadcasters – BBC, Sky News, ITN, Channel 4 News, and Sky News. We also work with news agency video teams including Press Association, Bloomberg and Thomson-Reuters. All eight organizations often attend our ‘live’ GDP briefings held each quarter at Westminster. These began in January 2010, and play a key role in our dissemination strategy.

The investment in media training has reaped substantial free-to-air rewards for ONS. Since November 2011, ONS has conducted more than 50 positive national TV and radio interviews, and more than 100 positive regional radio interviews.

We have also invested in broadcast-quality video equipment to create a mock studio environment. The camera and lighting kit can be used to provide ‘refresher’ media training before an important release. Equally, it can be used to make videos explaining ONS outputs, which can then be broadcast online and linked to Twitter feeds.

By taking our message direct to the public via broadcast media, the amount of negative newspaper coverage has simultaneously declined.

## **ii) Improving clarity**

ONS regularly reviews the content of statistical bulletins and news releases to aid transparency. The number of news releases has diminished, reflecting the improved drafting of bulletins for the web site and the migration online of compendia. The website now hosts releases written in bullet point ‘key headlines’, with additional text and tables. The objective is to produce an explanatory news release only where the complexities of the statistics demand further explanation. Decisions on the production and output of news releases are made by relevant departments and MRO.

## **iii) Developing relationships**

Actively engaging with journalists in an up-front manner helps improve trust and build credibility. Since 2009, ONS MRO has sought to increase meetings with influential economic journalists and develop two-way relationships. We arrange trips to meet broadcasters and journalists, including the BBC.

Statisticians gain a taste of life in a busy news organization, and get to meet the people who might interview them. We also do more to ‘sell in’ important forthcoming releases.

### **3. Proactive Tactics**

The proactive media strategy for 2012 to 2015 aims to broaden public understanding of official statistics by developing the following work streams.

#### **i) Working with the BBC**

Since 2009, ONS MRO has established long-lasting links with the BBC. The corporation has trust-ratings far higher than other independent news providers. Public funding also makes the BBC a strong and stable media partner, able to withstand technological change and market forces.

MRO has built a solid relationship. Currently, the BBC features ‘live’ TV coverage of GDP quarterly first estimates, labour market statistics, CPI/ RPI inflation, retail sales, public sector finances and ‘short story’ articles, amounting to around five ‘live’ TV appearances per month on the BBC News Channel, occasionally boosted by an additional sit-down interview for the main BBC TV news programmes. Audio is often re-broadcast on news programmes heard by millions.

In addition, ONS statisticians continue to feature on daytime regional radio across the UK, courtesy of the BBC General News Service, which can connect up to 18 regional radio stations direct to a statistician for a live two-hour ‘radio round’ of interviews from the south coast of England to the north of Scotland.

#### **ii) Building BBC Relations**

The ONS MRO strategy for 2012-2015 is to continue to promote and support these core BBC activities. Areas being developed include data visualisation, with stronger links and project work between ONS and the BBC. MRO is setting up meetings in 2012 to build better links between BBC data visualisation teams, MRO and output areas.

We are also seeking to strengthen links with regional BBC News – developing key contacts at some of the UK’s biggest newsrooms including Manchester and Birmingham ahead of the first headline Census ‘headline’ indicator in July 2012. Meetings with key regional media are being led by the newly-appointed Census media team.

#### **iii) UK National Written Media**

ONS can face criticism in national written media. Broadcasters barely bother to cover statistical rows, but national newspapers are much more likely to dig beneath the surface – errors in construction numbers, GDP figures, and occasional allegations of data leaks can all excite journalists.

One of the best ways of combating negative PR is through the development of positive two-way relationships. When a newspaper makes an error, MRO seeks face to face meetings to ‘put things right’ and build good relationships by offering bespoke one-to-one phone interview opportunities with statisticians.

#### **iv) News Agencies**

News agencies offer an extremely effective way of disseminating data. The ‘big three’ UK players - Press Association (PA), Bloomberg and Thomson Reuters – are well resourced and can offer ONS substantial cost-free benefits in the form of speedy global news distribution and free-to-air video clips.

In addition, MRO has built long-lasting and positive relations with PA Broadcasting. They regularly interview media-trained statisticians on topics including labour market statistics, retail sales, and inflation. The video interviews are clipped down into ‘sound bites’ and offered to national and regional press websites, reaching a potential online audience of millions.

#### **v) Specialist Media**

Specialist magazines and periodicals cater for a niche audience and can boast substantial readerships. Women’s magazines, health periodicals and lifestyle publications all use a plethora of ONS data, from financial information to data on fertility and population.

Specialist websites are often dismissed by ‘media’ PR practitioners, but opportunities to reach mass audiences are growing every year as magazines and periodicals migrate exclusively online and end their printed versions to save money. Organisations like these can provide a mass market audience for ONS products.

### **4. Proactive Methods of Delivery**

How do we get the numbers across to the media? In addition to issuing the usual monthly bulletins, and publishing the short stories mentioned above, ONS Media Relations Office uses the following tools to secure balanced coverage.

#### **i) GDP ‘First Estimate’ Briefing**

A ‘live’ media briefing on the ‘first estimate’ of GDP is held every quarter. Since the UK entered recession in 2008, the first estimate, provided 25 days after the end of each quarter, has attracted huge national and international media interest.

ONS held its first ‘live’ televised briefing on GDP at Westminster, London, in January 2010, and we have held one every quarter since then (9 in total). The announcement of the key ‘headline’ numbers is made at exactly 09.30hrs by the ONS Chief Economist, accompanied by a media-trained senior statistician who compiles the GDP numbers.

MRO hires a media room with full TV/ radio broadcast live links and wi-fi accessibility for bloggers and writers. The event, which usually lasts around 10 minutes, is televised by both the BBC and Sky News. Around 15 correspondents and national economic journalists usually attend. The announcement, against a back-drop of ONS branding, runs in tandem with our long-standing GDP ‘lock-in’ briefing for economic news agencies held at our offices in central London. All the numbers from both briefings go live at 09.30hrs, in keeping with our policy of equal and open access to everyone.

Delivering the numbers in this way helps ONS get its message across from the start. Broadcasters tend to take the numbers at face value: newspaper specialists may look elsewhere for comment or criticism.

## **ii) Short Stories**

ONS has been producing short stories for the past two years. As all ONS content has now moved online, statisticians have been working to identify and produce ‘bite-sized’ short stories that frame and analyse a single issue, rather than produce complex compendia featuring multiple chapters. The labour market team within ONS has produced several short stories, accompanied by animated video podcasts which illustrate trends on interesting topics including unemployment amongst graduates, commuting to work, and the skill levels of non-UK born workers. Short stories attract very wide media interest, are easily understood and well reported.

For further examples, go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/onsstats>

## **iii) ‘Ad Hoc’ Briefings**

One-off media briefings on potentially difficult releases can also help get messages across in a straight-forward way. These ‘ad hoc’ updates are normally held at the ONS London offices at 10.30hrs for a selection of specialist print journalists.

ONS Media Relations Office has used them to promote novel events, including the 2011 launch of the Prime Minister’s project to measure national well-being. We also used a one-off briefing in 2011 to fend off criticism of retail sales figures by a non-statistical organisation which regularly criticised our figures. In addition, we held a briefing in September 2011 to outline the changes to our national accounts: had we not done so, journalists would have been much more likely to misreport the changes.

## **iv) Seminars**

Over the past three years, ONS has held a series of one-off seminars or half-day conferences for specialists on economic topics ranging from retail sales to the labour market. Whilst these are aimed primarily at the experts who use the data, they also offer a useful opportunity to build public relations bridges by inviting journalists along to meet specialists. Starting the conference with a half-hour media briefing on a hot media topic like unemployment can help disseminate statistics to key media audiences before the rest of the conference gets underway.

## **v) ‘Ad hoc’ stories**

Statistical stories that are not linked to specific data outputs, but are tied to an event, anniversary, or global happening can bolster any proactive campaign. Where our statistics allow, ONS produces ‘ad hoc’ information that helps to set a media event in context. Each case, usually a non-political anniversary, is carefully considered.

For example, ONS MRO released statistics showing the shape of UK society in 1912 and 2012 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, securing extensive media coverage. Last year, we produced a special one-off release celebrating ‘70 Years of Social Surveys’ at ONS which attracted coverage across the BBC network. Equally, we marked UN World Statistics Day in 2011 with a well-publicised release. For International Women’s Day, we issued numbers on women’s earnings, and to mark the fifth annual Earth Hour in 2012, we released data showing that whilst the UK was using less energy than in 2007, customers were paying more for it.

These ‘soft’ releases generate positive ‘PR’ for ONS. They are taken at face value, and enjoyed by journalists looking for ‘colour’ stories showing societal change.

#### **vi) Infographics**

MRO works closely with graphics and data visualisation teams at ONS to promote numbers in graphic form that illustrate an interesting topic. For example, ONS developed an online graphic showing the Olympic torch route through the UK in 2012. The map allowed a user to click on the town where they lived to reveal interesting information about the local economy, demography, employment, etc.

Graphics teams have also produced static visualisations to promote our inflation data in the shape of the goods that go into an average shopping basket each year and help calculate changes in inflation. Links to these were sent out on Twitter.

#### **vii) Twitter, Facebook and Youtube**

Links to Twitter and Facebook are embedded in the notes to ONS statistical releases, and YouTube links are embedded on the website. Twitter is used as an instant promotional tool on the morning of a release, and Tweets are sent out detailing release headlines with links to full analysis. ONS has 7,000 Twitter followers – more than 900 of them (13 per cent) work in the media. ONS also has around 500 Facebook followers.

### **5. Measuring Success**

Over the the past three financial years, there has been a marked increase in ONS stories in the national media. In the year to March 2010 ONS was mentioned in 2,879 stories. The figure for the year to March 2011 stood at 6,203, and in the year to March 2012 was 7,575 – an increase of 260 per cent. The total number of negative stories across this three-year period totalled 178. The current level of negative coverage amounts to around 1 per cent of all print media coverage.

### **6. Conclusions**

A proactive media model soaks up time and resources. It can generate more calls and create increasing internal demands. If successful, it can lead to more calls for one-off proactive projects, both from the media and from within a statistical organization. In short, proactivity pays dividends, but creates greater internal pressures. The risk is that, should a proactive event go badly, a statistical organization might decide to revert to a defensive, reactive mode of operation. Proactive opportunities therefore need to be handled with care: if mistakes are made, they are writ large for all to see.

Proactivity means visibility. Success lies in developing stronger links with the media, developing trust, meeting journalists, and coming up with inventive ways of publicising national statistics. It does not mean giving preferential access to sections of the media, which would contravene the spirit of the UN Fundamental Principles. It does mean working harder, and smarter, to ensure that a national statistical organization like ONS is the place where people come first for trusted statistics.

