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Session 3: New Ways of Engaging Audiences

**PRESENTING FIGURES IN PICTURES
CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED GETTING STARTED WITH WEB TV
IN STATISTICS DENMARK**

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Abstract

Statistics Denmark started preparations for introducing web TV on our website 18 months ago, and this paper presents a status on this project. Focus is on the considerations and strategic decisions made in the process, i.e. choosing how to prioritize what subjects and statistics to communicate via video, as well as lessons learned. So far we have chosen to put our limited resources into producing a mix of different kinds of videos presenting figures, complex concepts and external comments. We also aim at balancing between presenting very popular statistics and introducing more complex subjects, although the subject should be able to attract a certain amount of interest if the efforts are not to be wasted.

I. Introduction

1. Communication channels like web TV offer new ways of presenting data in a more attractive manner for both old and new users by visualising heavy subject matters, adding faces to the abstract figures and forcing the producer to keep it short and simple. These were some of the central reasons why the Communication Division at Statistics Denmark 18 months ago took the first steps towards introducing live pictures on our website.
2. In the summer of 2012, we are still beginners with a limited number of films on our website and much more to learn, but we have gained some valuable experiences on, i.e. the organization of the work, technical challenges and choosing interview persons. Furthermore, the process has brought us through reflections on what content to focus on. Should we promote “bestsellers” that already tend to sell themselves, but will also attract a large amount of interest? Or should we focus our resources on communicating complex concepts and subjects with a more limited audience?

II. Background

3. In the initial phase of deciding to introduce web TV into Statistics Denmark parts of the organization responded somewhat sceptically. There were worries about the consequences of

opening for a variety of social media. One worry was that it might influence the reputation of Statistics Denmark as a serious and highly credible organization. Presenting the fact that other national statistical organizations, i.e. in The Netherlands, international organizations like OECD and some Danish Ministries had already included web TV on their websites – apparently without losing credibility – helped reduce the scepticism.

4. A part of the precaution regarded the use of YouTube and potentially being confronted with critical comments or questions that make it necessary to uphold a constant preparedness. For IT and data security reasons, Statistics Denmark has chosen to close the access of the employees to social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and the organization had, therefore, limited experiences with contacts with users via social media. We have also chosen to keep our YouTube channel closed for comments in the first phase to avoid potentially having to close it subsequently, and thereby signalling that we have had or are unable to handle negative response. Furthermore, it is a question of resources, since a channel open for comments would demand that we monitor the channel constantly and respond to comments.

III. Why use short and superficial videos for complex subjects like statistics?

5. The use of web TV is an attempt to meet our users where they are. First of all, it is not meant as a replacement of our other products, but an extension to catch the attention of especially the new users of statistical data. A two-minute video may not tell the full story, but it has a number of potentials. Web TV is a “lean back” media contrary to web and physical publications, which are “lean forward” media. That means it is another and more passive way of receiving information. Some people find it easier to lean about complex topics in that way. A web TV spot should be no longer than a couple of minutes. This implies that you have to convey conclusions quickly and down to the point. It can be a good supplement or intro to a complex report or topic. Hopefully, it makes people who would usually not read the report curious to know more. Finally, it can be used to add comments or side stories to journalistic articles.

IV. Presentation of bestsellers or complex subjects with a limited audience

6. Choosing subjects for web TV productions has caused a number of discussions on the strategic use of the media. Some statistics are easy to present in an attractive form and have the potential to attract lots of interest from curious users. An example is statistics on names – those given to new-born babies as well as in the entire population – which is a subject that always attracts great media attention and makes up the most frequently visited pages on the website. However, such subjects tend to sell themselves whereas other – heavier – subjects represent important parts of our statistical production, but are very difficult to understand for non-expert users of statistics. Such subjects are, for one thing, a challenge to simplify and make understandable in a two- minute video clipping in a sober manner, for another, the audience will inevitably be more limited and possibly consist in a quite small number of persons, compared to the efforts put into the project. We are still in a phase where we try to find the answer to this question. So far, our limited production is probably somewhere in between.

V. Four kinds of videos

7. We have divided the potential subjects into four different kinds of films for varying audiences and purposes that we all wish to present on the website.

1. The first kind is the actual presentation of statistics on a subject. Such a video can introduce the field of interest and present the current figures.

2. The second variety is a video explaining one or more complex concepts used in statistics. While writing this paper we are planning a production explaining the different unemployment figures released by Statistics Denmark and Eurostat and the relative advantages of using the different varieties depending on the purpose. The distinction between these concepts is complex, but it is a subject of great interest and important for the media in interpreting unemployment figures. Another potentially upcoming project of this kind is a video that gives an educational simplified introduction to the National Accounts.

3. The third kind is as a supplement to our online magazine *Bag tallene* (Behind the figures) that presents our figures journalistically. The articles present figures from Statistics Denmark and include comments from external experts on the development. In this variety, small video clippings with external comments can supplement the journalistic article.

4. Finally, web TV can be used for branding purposes, i.e. an introduction to the organization or a video that presents career opportunities.

8. So far, we have produced – or are in the process of producing – videos of the last three kinds, and it is our aim to produce videos in all these fields. We wish to use web TV as a media for short items, where our messages are communicated in varied clippings that can keep the attention of users without patience for text explanations, no matter if the subject is statistical figures or branding purposes. We find that this is the best way to make use of the potentials in this media. Consequently, we have in the first place decided to avoid productions with long sessions of filming “talking heads” in lectures or conferences and conveying them directly to the web TV media.

VI. Trial and error – fire alarm could have disturbed national election

9. When the organization had decided to include web TV on the website, the technical equipment was ordered, and four members of the communication team went on a three day crash course in video production. Our production team consisted of one journalist and three communication officers. Such a short course gives a basic understanding of a number of the tools available for video production, but leaves space for very limited amounts of practical training. The following phase has therefore entailed not few instances of learning from mistakes.

10. One mistake with the potential for catastrophic effects happened during the filming of the very first video. It was on the day of election for the Danish parliament in September 2011, and Statistics Denmark had been appointed by the Danish Ministry of the Interior to collect and sum up the national votes. Two members of our video team decided that this historical event would be a good opportunity to gain experience and at the same time highlight this crucial democratic assignment of Statistics Denmark. Cameras and lights were

set up, and luckily the afternoon test revealed an unforeseen technical problem, before the consequences were too grave. The strong lights overheated the ceiling and caused a fire alarm and an unintended visit by the fire brigade. Counterbalancing the importance of the national election versus video documentation, we quickly changed plans and reduced the lights to a setting that could not endanger the reception of the votes although the quality would be reduced. However, the film was produced and is now available at the website of Statistics Denmark at <http://www.dst.dk/da/OmDS/opgaver-og-strategi.aspx>.

VII. Other lessons learned the hard way

11. Our still very limited production has taught us other lessons of both technical and organizational nature.

12. On the technical side, we have first of all learned what not to do when it comes to putting up the right light to avoid shadows, adjusting the sound and avoiding too long interviews. We have found that in most cases it is an advantage to ask the same questions several times or to ask the person interviewed to sum up the main points in the end to get the best quotes. Also small practical issues, like keeping a logical and user-friendly system of storing films and pictures for later use, can make life quite a bit easier, not least when sharing a computer for film production.

13. Organizational lessons include the experience that being two editors in front of a computer screen is not compatible with the temper of all employees. Another important finding relates to choosing persons for interviews for the clippings. In the world of statistics, there are quite a few experts who are highly qualified for producing statistics on a given subject, but this does not necessarily entail that they are the right choices for visualization. Choosing persons with a certain level of charm and variety in facial expressions and voice is a large advantage when trying to humanize subjects that may be conceived as heavy and abstract. This process of choosing and training statisticians from different fields simultaneously fulfils our aim to train a number of employees to be ready and willing to participate when the Danish media ask for experts to explain subjects on TV. We have in a number of cases experienced a reserved attitude among staff towards participating in such items. Being confronted with a growing interest from the media to make use of our knowledge, we therefore wish to strengthen such qualifications.

VIII. Challenges in phase two

14. Having had a number of first performances the production meets the challenges of trying to fit into an extremely busy everyday life in a small communication unit with many ideas and wishes. The backing of an organizational decision to produce web TV does not supply the extra hours for a project that is not related to the day-to-day production of statistics and is quite time-consuming for a team of non-professionals. The production is expected to fit into the working routines of a department that is strained by an abundance of projects and an ever declining number of employees to solve them.

15. We are still beginners, but a few steps further. Our next goal is to build up a form and reach a level of production where videos form a natural part of the joint expression of our website rather than representing sporadic items spread across the site. Choosing how to make such fingerprints on the website also entails decisions on how much ambitions of structural uniformity of the sections should influence our choices of subjects. Should we refrain from producing video clippings for suitable parts of the site because other sections will not be

covered due to a lack of resources or prioritizing other productions?

16. So far, our video clippings have been watched 2-300 times each, and that is not very much compared to the resources put into the project. However, we have never had any illusions that presenting videos would attract large numbers of new visitors to our website. Neither has the goal been to replace other forms of communication, but rather to offer a supplemental way of communicating our figures. Furthermore, in the years to come, choosing not to include web TV on our website would constitute an equally strong decision. Such a decision would send signals to our users that we have chosen not to be a part of a development with a variety of electronic communication channels aimed at different types of users.

17. Our current phase is, of course, characterized by uncertainty regarding the future development, but it is also a phase with many possibilities and interesting choices. Therefore, we are very interested to hear the experiences – good and bad – from other NSOs using videos on their website.