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Session 1: Statistical literacy

**Meeting the Information Needs of News Media
to Increase Citizens' Understanding of Statistical Findings**

Gabrielle Beaudoin, Canada

I. INTRODUCTION

In keeping pace with the evolving landscape and expectations of news media, Statistics Canada has adopted a strategy that combines traditional and innovative communication practices, with the goal of expanding coverage and improving the accuracy of media coverage about the Canadian economy and society.

This paper will describe the proactive, multi-channel approach adopted by the agency to educate journalists and be more responsive to their needs. Media relations activities span from determining the content and style of statistical releases, to hosting concept brief sessions and media lockups, up to training spokespersons and publishing new media content to increase Canadians' understanding of the state of the country.

II. THE CANADIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The media landscape in Canada is evolving rapidly and constantly. The advent of the Internet and social media have accelerated the news cycle. Media are challenged to provide instant, accurate and thorough coverage. At the same time, news outlets face financial pressures, and some work with a reduced workforce. As well, media have expressed the view that it is increasingly difficult to get information from federal government departments. Competition is intense.

In Canada, three major national news agencies provide timely and relevant coverage which other media take and use, and supplement with coverage from their own news staff. The news agencies are structured differently. The oldest, Canadian Press/La Presse canadienne, produces news reports in both English and French. It has satellite bureaus across the country. Another, Postmedia, has recently reduced its workforce after expanding its Ottawa bureau about a decade ago. It continues, however, to feed content to about ten major daily newspapers across Canada. Another news agency,

SunMedia-QMI, is an affiliation of English and French news media that collaborate, translate and share news copy.

International news agencies also cover Statistics Canada in depth. These agencies are primarily interested in economic data that can move financial markets. They report on releases of key economic data, and for them, time is of the essence.

Daily newspapers remain a key source of information for Canadians, and continue to set the agenda for other media. A story which appears on the front page of a major daily will be picked up by other news media in the following days. However, many newspapers are facing financial strain as ad revenues decrease and competition from 24-hour news channels increases. As a result, dailies have adapted by printing fewer pages, not publishing Sunday editions, or tailoring subscriptions to offer a combination of print content and Internet access.

III. COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Although Statistics Canada's official dissemination mechanism is through its website and the online release *The Daily*, it is through news media that most Canadians become aware of key findings of Statistics Canada's surveys and develop recognition of the agency as an authoritative source of information. Based on that premise, the first step to ensure citizens are well informed of the state of the economy and society is to help media find information quickly and report it accurately.

Telling the story

Statistics Canada has a long-standing tradition of providing a daily *rendez-vous* to media. With [*The Daily*](#), the agency's official release vehicle since 1932, published at 8:30 a.m. every working day, generations of journalists have started their day with facts and figures. After taking many forms over the years, the bulletin has matured into an online resource that tells the story behind the data.

The storytelling starts with subject-matter analysts at all levels taking training from communications experts. In half-day sessions, they are taken through a series steps to "translate" analytical articles into succinct narratives. Using plain language and applying the proverbial inverted pyramid style to emphasize the lead points of their article, they transform scientific information into facts that the media – and the public – can grasp. The goal is for the reader to recognize the newsworthy information in five minutes or less.

The successful transition to storytelling, however, does not reside solely on the training session, but on the ongoing, one-on-one support provided to analysts by the Communications Division – the entity responsible and accountable for the official release program.

Demystifying statistical concepts

The Census of Population Program releases each include a vast amount of information on many topics, which can be challenging to massage into news articles in a few hours. To support journalists while protecting unpublished information, Statistics Canada has endeavoured since 2001 to educate them on the statistical concepts that

support each release.

A few weeks prior to release, Statistics Canada publishes a high-level presentation of the concepts of the analytical publications in its online [Media room](#). An email invites journalists to familiarize themselves with the concepts online and to participate in person or by teleconference in a session with the lead analysts to learn more about those concepts.

The concept briefs have been well attended and have helped in improving accuracy of media coverage about observed socioeconomic changes.

Providing secure onsite access in media lockups

The financial news agencies attend secure media lockups hosted by Statistics Canada, in which they are granted access to news releases one hour before release, but under strictly controlled conditions. The financial journalists can work on their reports and ask questions of subject-matter experts during the lockup, but cannot release information until official release time. At release, news stories appear almost instantly on Internet news sites, and most are published in daily newspapers the following day.

On average, Statistics Canada hosts 150 media lockups per year, with attendance of over 1000 journalists.

In Census of Population release years, this number increases as up to 50 journalists attend overnight lockups¹ for each release. In those particular lockups, journalists compile data at the local level and prepare multiple stories that provide Canadians a complete and accurate depiction of the social and demographic findings from the census program.

Responding promptly to media inquiries

Media expect up-to-date and relevant information from Statistics Canada on the country's economy, social conditions and environment. However, their knowledge of statistics varies widely. Some know very little and are most comfortable when the agency provides them the information they require, although it may be possible to get the data on the Statistics Canada website. Others have a keen sense of the ability of data to tell a story, and request detailed statistical information which is not readily accessible.

Media hotline services provided by officers who are knowledgeable about data holdings ensure prompt response to media inquiries. For its media relations section, Statistics Canada often hires employees who have a degree or some background in journalism, as they are well-equipped to understand the needs of journalists.

Granting professional interviews

Radio and television outlets, many of which have their own Internet news sites, contact Statistics Canada frequently, most often to request data.

¹ The extended length of the Census of Population Program lockups is to accommodate the significant increase in the volume of data associated with census releases.

When they do request interviews, it tends to be when the agency's releases provide new social analysis or local data. With the 24-hour news channels, it is not uncommon for interviews to air repeatedly over a 24-hour cycle.

Media have expressed the view that it is sometimes difficult to get information from federal government departments. They wish to have more direct access to both elected officials and technical experts. Some have come to expect that the response to probing questions will not be an interview, but rather a carefully crafted written response sent by e-mail. They are pleasantly surprised when a spokesperson does grant them an interview.

Statistics Canada is one of the few federal departments that interacts with the media on a daily basis and grants interviews regularly. Spokespersons must understand that their role is not to provide personal opinion or comment on policy. Rather, it is to inform Canadians about society by communicating key findings of surveys and statistical studies. They must receive media training before they speak for attribution on behalf of the agency.

At Statistics Canada, communications specialists provide media training in both official languages for spokespersons. In the course, spokespersons learn how to position themselves to speak on behalf of Statistics Canada and avoid policy issues. They also gain knowledge of media techniques, such as negotiating an interview and preparing key messages, and tips to keep the interview on track. Practical exercises, including a live, simulated television interview, and feedback from course instructors, enable spokespersons to put into practice what they have learned and improve their interview skills. All is delivered in a one-day course. Communications staff also delivers additional, focused training and refreshers to ensure spokespersons remain confident to give media interviews.

Tracking and correcting inaccurate coverage

Media relations officers monitor media coverage daily and circulate articles to subject-matter areas for verification. When errors in coverage are detected, corrections and clarifications are sent by communications to the reporter who wrote the article. Internet articles are often updated after they first appear, so, on release day, changes can be made with a minimum of effort for the journalist or news agency. Later versions of the article in print and other media are correct, provided the error is addressed quickly. After release day, the window of opportunity closes, as any corrections would have to reach many media outlets. In the past two years, over a dozen corrections to media coverage have been made each month.

Adopting a new media mix

In the past 15 years, Internet has changed how we communicate with the public. Statistics Canada used to have to wait until the day after release to see news coverage. In the late 1990s, news agencies and media outlets set up Internet sites. News coverage of Statistics Canada releases and studies became widely accessible minutes after release. The news sites were an instant success, and provided a wealth of free content at the onset; with time, they have posted a reduced number of free articles, but remain widely used.

Social media and bloggers have blurred the definition of news media. Many bloggers are not media in the traditional sense in that journalism is not their primary expertise. They can be economists, activists, or academics, among other occupations. Nevertheless, they comment on releases and analyses. They are less strictly bound to report factually than news media and they often express personal opinions in their posts.

To support bloggers and other writers interested in statistical information, and engage online with Canadians, Statistics Canada uses social media platforms and new media. With over 100,000 followers, the Twitter account is by far the most popular channel. The YouTube channel is also growing in popularity, with some videos having attracted much attention. The most recent example is the video on the *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*, which was very well received at the United Nations Statistical Commission in New York, and was much commented in social media.

To complement data releases, the agency also posts information on Facebook, produces online tutorials and hosts Chat with an Expert sessions to engage online with data users – all of which strengthen its online presence and give credibility to the agency in social media circles.

After developing an expertise in social media, Statistics Canada expanded into blogs in January 2013. The *StatCan Blog* is designed to inform Canadians of Statistics Canada's major projects and priorities and give them an opportunity to comment and ask questions. It is a high-level corporate blog, targeted at engaged and relatively sophisticated users. Journalists sometimes quote information from the StatCan Blog in news articles. The blog forms part of a suite of tools which facilitate a continued dialogue with Canadians throughout the statistical development process and ensures that the agency's products and services remain relevant to users.

IV. CONCLUSION

As Canada's national statistical agency, Statistics Canada has a responsibility to ensure its data is accessible, visible and well understood. For that reason, the agency has built a strong working relationship with the media, which sets it apart from other government departments in Canada.

Statistics Canada openly communicates findings of data releases and studies with news media, and uses multiple channels to meet their needs. This contributes to the agency's positive relations with news media, who, by amplifying our voice in news reports, assist Statistics Canada to achieve its mandate of publishing relevant statistical information on all aspects of Canadian society.

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