

Reaching out to data users regarding next-generation news releases

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Abstract

In the fall of 2015, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics initiated a nine-month outreach program to determine what readers and producers of our statistical news releases need and want from the most visible publications issued by the agency. Tools have included a web survey, focus groups, and listening sessions in a variety of contexts. This paper will discuss our experiences with the different mechanisms, their respective strengths and weaknesses, what we learned from each, and conclude with some preliminary thoughts on how we may redesign BLS news releases based on our analysis of the information we received.

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Reaching out to data users regarding next-generation news releases

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The national office of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) issues approximately 160 news releases each year announcing the availability of new data and summarizing economically significant topics such as employment and unemployment, wages and benefits, inflation, productivity, worker safety and health, etc. In addition, BLS regional offices issue another 700-plus news releases tailored for local audiences. News releases are a core vehicle through which BLS communicates with our data users.

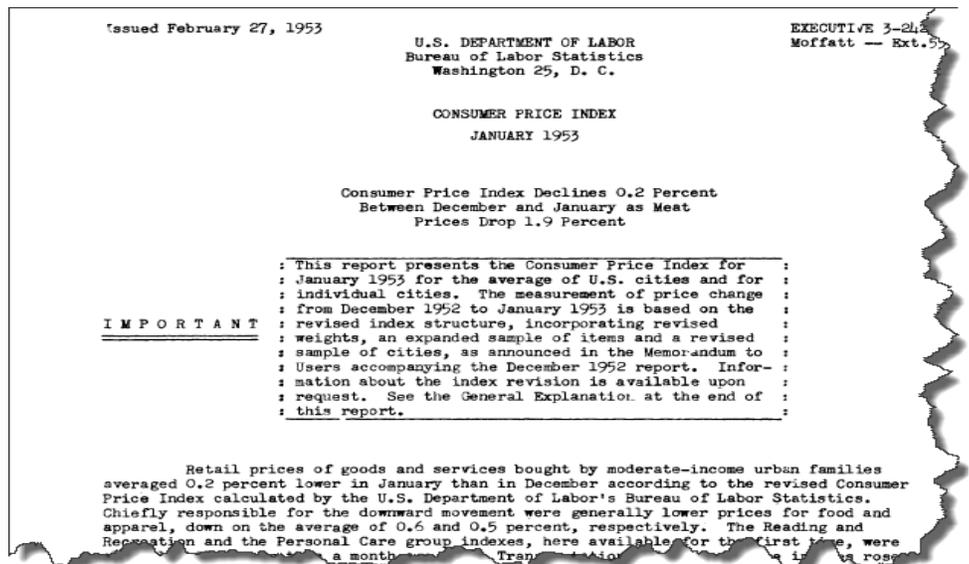
Each news release has essentially the same structure:

- Identifying information
- Text (including embedded tables and charts, typically limited to relatively few series or data points)
- Technical notes
- Detailed tables

Special “box notes” may appear at the beginning or end of the text to draw attention to methodological changes or unusual circumstances. BLS posts both PDF and HTML versions of each news release to our website; the HTML version omits embedded charts. The Consumer Price Index release (http://www.bls.gov/schedule/archives/cpi_nr.htm) is a typical example.

The scope and methodology of most BLS surveys and programs have undergone significant transformations over the last 60 years. The structure and presentation of our news releases, however, have barely changed.

There are at least two ways to explain such a discrepancy. One is that we got it right long ago and, aside from a few tweaks at the margins, there is no reason to make news release modifications now.



Alternatively, maybe the world has changed and BLS has fallen behind in meeting user needs, indicating that we should be considering substantive changes to the product. In the summer of 2015, BLS began a year-long initiative to solicit feedback from the readers and producers of our news releases in order to distinguish between these possibilities, with an eye to undertaking a significant redesign if the results pointed us in that direction.

Stakeholder outreach was conducted using four approaches. The first was a web-based reader survey.¹ Respondents were solicited through appeals sent to the BLS media lists, to news release subscribers, over Twitter, and with a banner on the BLS website. In total, approximately 100,000 solicitations were sent. These garnered 3,174 responses.

Second were focus groups for journalists, split between regional reporters (only three attended their session, which was conducted over WebEx) and Washington, DC-based reporters (nine reporters attended the session, all of whom participate in the pre-release “lock-up” where they receive the news releases 30 minutes before release time under a tightly enforced embargo).

Third were a series of 12 listening sessions for BLS staff, targeted to employees who work on the production of news releases or answer questions from the public. In all, approximately 110 staff attended.

Finally, a one-hour session was dedicated to receiving feedback from the BLS Data Users Advisory Committee (DUAC) on changes they would like to see in BLS news releases. This committee provides advice to BLS from the points of view of data users from various sectors of the U.S. economy, including the labor, business, research, academic and government communities, on matters related to the analysis, dissemination, and use of the Bureau’s data products.

For the most part, similar concerns and suggestions were received through all four modes, though different respondent populations voiced opinions with somewhat different emphases.

Findings

1) General

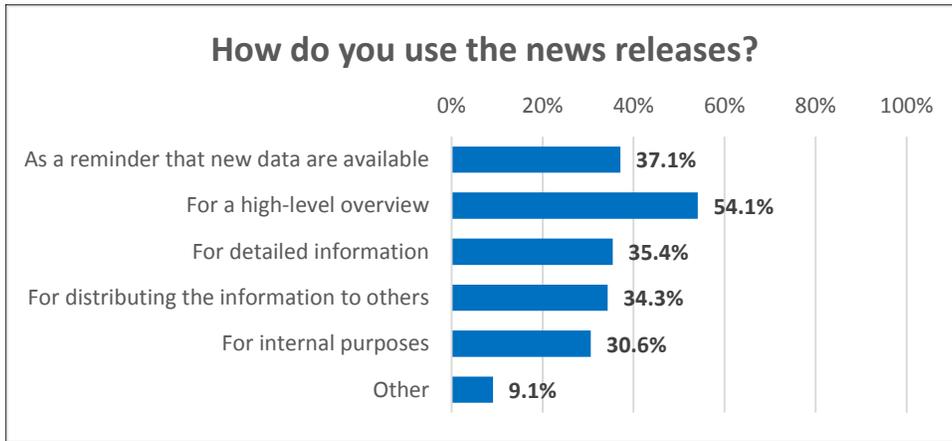
Somewhat to our surprise, only 7.4 percent of the online survey respondents self-identified as journalists (where “journalist” was defined to include social media). Though we have no empirical data from 50 or 60 years ago, our suspicion is that journalists comprised the majority of news release readers in the past.

57.5 percent of online survey respondents reported that BLS news releases are “Fine as is.” Of course that means that over 40 percent of the respondents believe that improvements can be made.

Almost all (99.4%) readers access BLS news releases from a workstation or laptop. Only about one-sixth of readers noted additional access through mobile devices (smart phones or tablets). This mobile usage is

¹ See Appendix 1 for the online survey instrument with responses and Appendix 2 for the questions asked during focus groups, listening sessions, and the advisory committee meeting. Note that the online survey results cited in this paper have been filtered to include only respondents who read two or more BLS news releases in the preceding three months.

lower than the anecdotal reports we have received from sister statistical agencies, and we suspect it is due to our having no mobile-friendly version of the news releases.



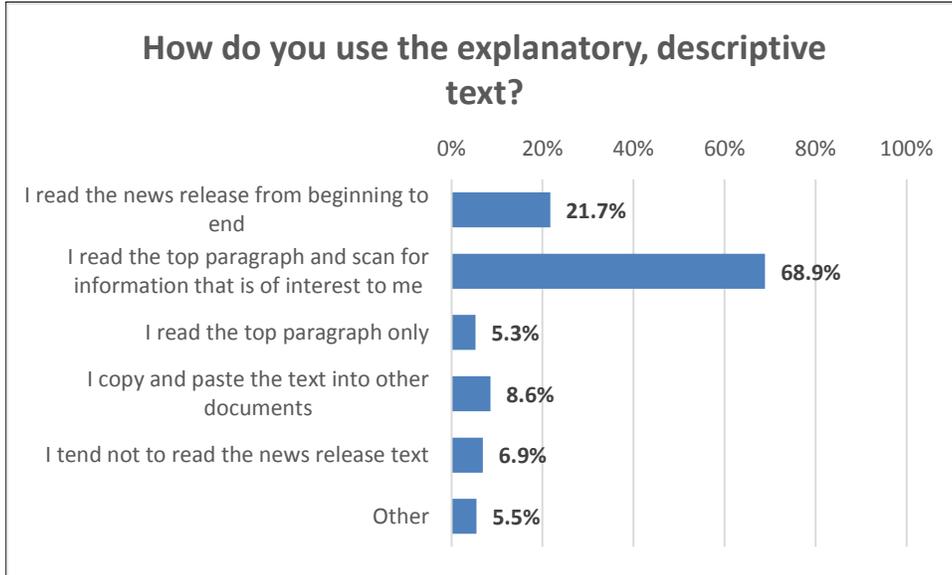
Only about one-third of readers obtain detailed information from BLS news releases, as opposed to about one-half who are looking for a high-level overview. About one-third also use the news releases as a reminder that new data have been issued.

The general themes identified in the survey’s free-form comments and focus groups responses include:

- “Don’t break what works”: Continue publishing timely summaries of the most important data;
- “Just the facts”: Provide data without interpretation or implied inferences;
- “Do the math”: Continue to publish percent changes, net changes, and similar summary statistics;
- “Make special factors easy to spot”: Use box notes and other formatting techniques to draw attention to unusual circumstances that may have influenced the data.

One theme mentioned repeatedly by BLS employees is that the current BLS news release structure is reasonably well suited for data that are essentially hierarchical (with one or a small number of topside summary statistics supported by detailed breakdowns, such as the national unemployment rate or all-items Consumer Price Index) but not so well suited for data that are primarily cross-sectional (like time use), or have many summary statistics of interest to particular segments of the user base (like metropolitan-area employment and earnings.)

2) Text section

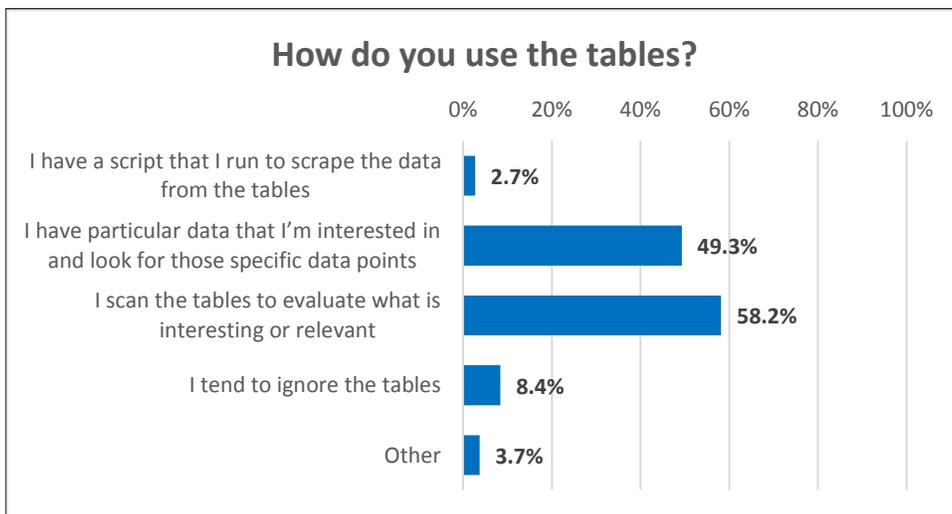


Only one-fifth of readers read our news releases from beginning to end. Over two-thirds read the topic paragraph and scan the rest.

The survey's free-form comments and focus groups responses identified the following primary themes:

- “Tell me what is important”: Use less text and more bullet points, maybe just a dashboard;
- “Give me the context”: Show longer historical trends, highlight unusual data movement, contrast with other data sets to provide additional insight;
- “Make it easier to read”: Simplify the language;
- “Help me get to the details that I’m interested in”: Make better use of links to data, definitions, and methodology.

3) Tables

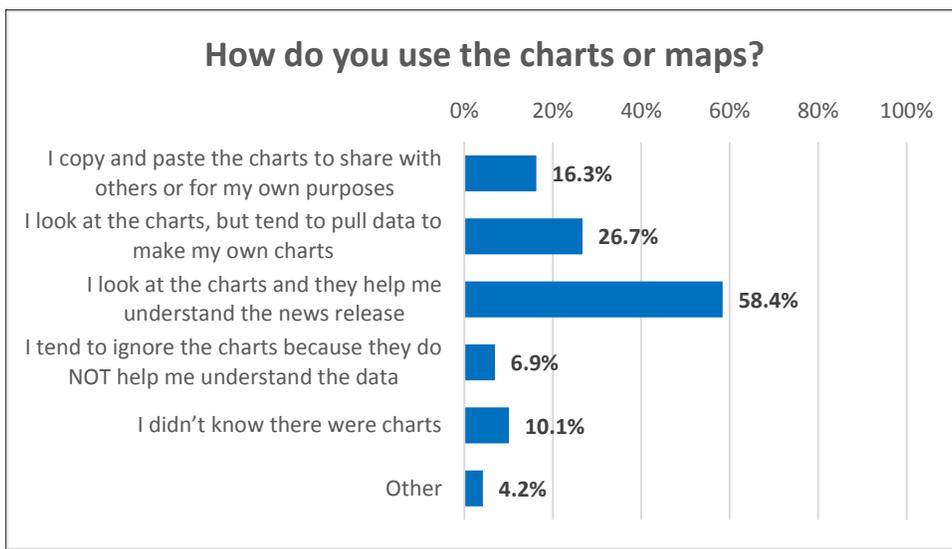


Half of our readers know in advance which data they are most interested in, and almost 60% skim the tables looking for data points that catch their attention.

The survey’s free-form comments and focus groups responses identified the following primary themes:

- “Make it easy for me to repurpose the data”: Deliver all tables in machine-readable format, Excel in particular;
- “Help me see the data I’m interested in”: Feature frequently cited data more prominently in tables;
- “Help me to get more data”: Make it easy to customize tables and extract further data points.

4) Charts and Maps

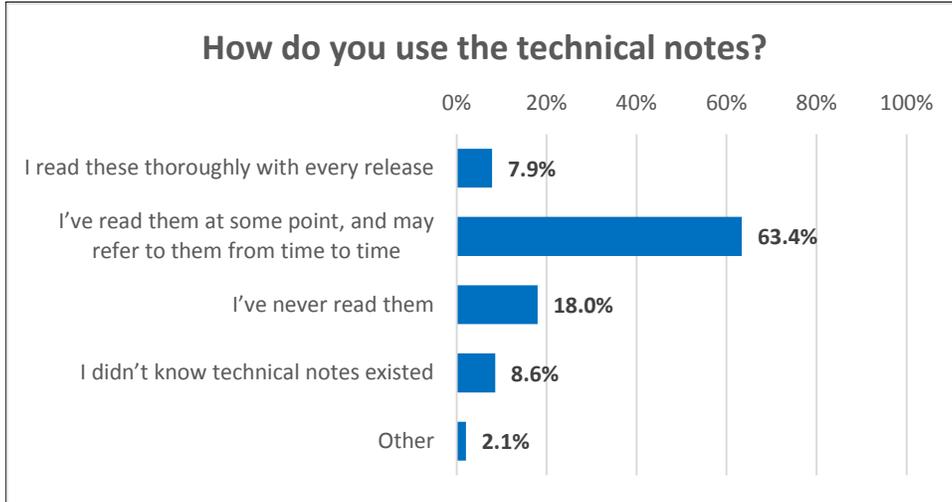


Readers who find the data visualizations useful outnumber those who don’t approximately 9-to-1. Just under one sixth of news release readers take our charts and reuse them.

The survey’s free-form comments and focus groups responses identified the following primary themes:

- “Give me more charts”: Respondents reported that data visualizations aid comprehension and provide insight;
- “Give me more data”: Show longer time spans;
- “Let me customize them”: Increase the interactive and animated elements.

5) Technical Note:



We did not receive many comments on the technical notes. The most common response was that methodology is essential when a reader wants it but that most readers do not want it regularly. One suggestion was that technical notes need not physically accompany every news release but should be just a click away.

6) Production process

In addition to discussing the content and presentation of news releases, BLS staff were asked about the business processes that precede publication. The following areas were mentioned most frequently as the phases of the production process that take the most time or effort:

- Writing the text, including supervisory review;
- Creating tables and charts;
- Fact checking data;
- Quality control across HTML and PDF formats.

Data gathering approaches

We found great value in using four different methods for soliciting user feedback. Each gave us a slightly different view of user needs and desires, but the substantial overlap among their responses is reassuring.

The online survey is our only source of quantitative data. Its response rate of just over 3 percent feels laughable in the context of a statistical agency but, in the context of a customer satisfaction survey with neither incentives nor nonresponse follow-up, it may not be wildly out of range (we have found it difficult to obtain reliable comparative data for assessment purposes). As long as we hold on to some healthy skepticism concerning data quality, the quantitative results give us a bird's-eye view of our news release readers.

In addition to the quantitative results, the online survey produced over 800 free-form text responses which have proved valuable in discerning more nuanced user needs and wants.

In general, journalists were the group most satisfied with the existing product and most insistent that we not remove any information they currently depend on. That said, reporters, too, would appreciate clearer language and better highlighting of significant information. Interestingly, reporters from national media outlets showed little interest in charts and maps, whereas regional reporters spoke quite favorably of these data visualizations. We suspect this is because the national journalists who participated in the focus group are lockup reporters, so the time they have available to digest the information is highly compressed and their focus is to write a coherent story as quickly as possible.

The Data User Advisory Committee was very concerned that BLS make no changes that might jeopardize our reputation for impartiality, and emphasized putting data in context, better integrating news releases into the website, and simplifying the language.

Both reporters and DUAC members wanted assurance that any changes would be tested and announced well in advance of going live.

Finally, BLS employees demonstrated that they do, in fact, have an accurate sense of user needs and want (or at least have similar needs and wants) in terms of news release structure and content. What BLS staff were uniquely able to provide, naturally, is insight into where changes to the product might save the agency time and resource expenditures.

Conclusions

At the beginning of our investigation, we were open to learning that BLS news releases are fine as they are and that significant change is unnecessary. The feedback we received, however, indicates that we can substantially improve the product to better meet user needs and desires.

As we think about possible redesigns, there are a number of things we will need to keep in mind. First and foremost, any contemplated changes must be approached in the context that BLS will continue to produce data of the highest quality – gold-standard data – and present it in a strictly objective manner.

Next, we are taking to heart the insight from BLS staff that one design or structure will most likely not fit all programs' data, and that we should instead be thinking about a compatible family of designs tailored separately to hierarchical, cross-sectional, and diffuse data sets.

One question we will need to address fairly soon is whether we should focus primarily on an audience of journalists or, given their rather small representation among users, treat news releases as essentially just another publication line with a broad reader community. Since the concerns voiced by self-identified journalists and non-journalists overlapped to a large degree, this will not be as difficult a decision as it might have been, but there are differences in emphasis that might lead to somewhat different solutions depending on which route we choose.

Finally, we are acutely aware that changing a product as central to our business as our news releases will inevitably be disruptive both for our established users and for us internally. Since BLS news releases are written and assembled by each program, rather than by a central communications organization, the internal disruption will be widespread. A key aspect of the task ahead will therefore be communicating and coordinating extensively with a diverse set of external and internal stakeholders.

BLS has now begun to mock up different approaches to next-generation news releases based on the stakeholder outreach described above. The mock-ups need to be further developed and refined, broadly distributed for review and comment, and then exhaustively tested. We expect substantial changes will also be required in the internal production processes which will need to be developed, reviewed, and thoroughly tested, as well. Our hope is to go live with the first groups of redesigned news releases approximately 18-24 months from now in fiscal year 2018.

Appendix 1

Web-based Reader Survey

Results from questions 2-10 are limited to the 91 percent of respondents who had read at least two news releases in the prior three months.

Question 1 – How often have you read any BLS news releases in the past 3 months?

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
6 or more times	38.9%
2-5 times	52.1%
This is my first time	4.3%
Never	2.6%
Other	2.1%

Question 2 – Which news releases do you use? (Select all that apply)

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
National news releases	85.1%
Regional news releases	47.6%
Don't know	8.1%
Total	

Question 3 – How do you use the news releases? (Select all that apply)

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
Simply as a reminder that new data are available	37.1%
For a high-level overview (identify key “take away” points)	54.1%
For detailed information (for example, for smaller geographic areas, a limited number of industries or occupations, etc.)	36.4%
For distributing the information to others	34.3%
For internal purposes	30.6%
Other	9.1%

Question 4 – How do you use the explanatory, descriptive text provided with each news release? (Select all that apply)

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
I read the news release from beginning to end	21.7%
I read the top paragraph and scan for information that is of interest to me	68.9%
I read the top paragraph only	5.3%
I copy and paste the text into other documents	8.6%
I tend not to read the news release text	6.9%
Other	5.5%

Question 5 – Please choose the statement that best describes how you use the charts or maps embedded in the news release. (Select all that apply)

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
I copy and paste the charts to share with others or for my own purposes	16.3%
I look at the charts, but tend to pull data to make my own charts	26.7%
I look at the charts and they help me understand the news release	58.4%
I tend to ignore the charts because they do NOT help me understand the data	6.9%
I didn't know there were charts	10.1%
Other	4.2%

Question 6 – How do you use the tables in news releases? (Select all that apply)

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
I have a script that I run to scrape the data from the tables	2.7%
I have particular data that I'm interested in and look for those specific data points	49.3%
I scan the tables to evaluate what is interesting or relevant	58.2%
I tend to ignore the tables	8.4%
Other	3.7%

Question 7 – Why do you tend to ignore the tables? (Select all that apply)

Answer Choices	Percent of Total
They are too difficult to work with	17.0%
I don't need the information in them	62.5%
They are poorly formatted	10.3%
Other	20.5%

Question 8 – Please choose the statement below that best describes how you use technical notes in news releases.

Answer Choice	Percent of Total
I read these thoroughly with every release	7.9%
I've read them at some point, and may refer to them from time to time	63.4%
I've never read them	18.0%
I didn't know technical notes existed	8.6%
Other	2.1%

Question 9 – How do you usually access BLS news releases?	
Answer Choices	Percent of Total
PC/laptop	99.4%
Tablet (or phablet)	8.1%
Smartphone	10.5%
Paper	1.8%
Other	0.7%

Question 10 – Which of the following best describes you?	
Answer Choices	Percent of Total
Journalist (including social media)	7.4%
Other	92.6%

Appendix 2

Questions asked during media focus groups:

1. What is your general opinion of BLS news releases? If you were asked to give them a grade, let's say A, B, C, or D, what grade would you assign, and why?
2. In your opinion, what is essential about the current news releases and should not be changed?
3. How do you use the BLS news releases?
 - a. Probe: How much of the explanatory, descriptive text do you use?
 - b. Probe: What level of user, for example, novice, moderately experienced, very experienced, are the news releases designed for? Why do you say that?
4. How do you use the charts and maps that are embedded in the news release?
 - a. Probe: How easy or difficult are they to use?
 - b. Probe: Are there any improvements that you would like to see made to them?
5. How do you use the tables in the news releases?
 - a. Probe: How easy or difficult are they to use?
 - b. Probe: Are there any improvements that you would like to see made to them?
6. How do you use the technical notes that accompany each press release?
 - a. Probe: Which audience do you think they are written for?
 - b. Probe: Are there any improvements we should make?
7. As BLS considers making changes to the news releases, what changes would you suggest, or that you would like us to investigate?
8. Are there any other comments or suggestions about press releases that you would like to pass along to BLS management?

Questions asked during employee listening sessions:

1. What is my program trying to convey with this news release?
2. Which parts of the news release require the most effort? (NOTE: we aren't interested in the time it takes to calculate the released figures.)
3. What changes would you make to BLS news releases (if any)?

Questions asked of the BLS Data Users Advisory Committee:

1. What is your general opinion of BLS news releases?
2. Does the current presentation of the text, tables, charts, maps, and technical notes fit your needs?
3. What is essential about the news releases and should not be changed?
4. As BLS considers possible changes to the news releases, what changes would you suggest we make, or that you would like us to investigate?