

The Statistics Dissemination of an Institution in Crisis

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Abstract

From December 2015, the INDEC started going through a process of regaining the credibility of state official statistics, and its own institutional structure.

At first, the institution required a diagnosis period where communication was and still is essential. We think communication as a dimension that deeply engages institutions and social practices; reducing the role of ‘communication’ to a mere instrument defies its true purpose and denies the complexities and its irrefutable link with culture.

As communication has a real transformative potential, management is indeed the development of that change, which consists in several stages: diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation. It is a journey that begins to be travelled from the moment the challenge is faced, in order to make a true change in the organization.

After setting this goal, the INDEC planned a qualitative and quantitative diagnostic – methodologically supported – in both physical and symbolic form of the human resources of the INDEC’s Dissemination Office. The results allowed the development of strategies to begin implementing changes; at the same time, this became a paradigm to the whole institution: true change had come.

The survey threw crystal clear results: the work environment was crossed by political conflicts long present in the institution over the past decade. Most areas were transformed into watertight compartments, with few links between each other, irresponsive to global programs and goals. For these and many other reasons, teams closed into themselves. The greatest damage of them all took a symbolic form: stigmatization, depersonalization, accompanied of loss of recognition and appreciation, and a consequent and inevitable loss of self-esteem. All this, in an area in which the working capital is the symbolic matter, meant twice the prejudice. So, how do we preach what we do not actually trust?

A strategy was developed and adopted to restore the lost values, to reinforce individual and team skills and efforts, and deconstruct physical and symbolic barriers erected to hide and distort information. This way, a new statistics communication plan was designed with the following goals:

- To promote social recognition of the roles the institution portrays; the socialization of knowledge that it produces; the democratization of access to information, and the recovery of autonomy, competence and transparency as irrefutable values.
- To review, plan and manage a comprehensive communication policy, set to seize resources and existing capital, and optimize communication production from existing areas through coordinated actions between each other.
- To collaborate in the transformation process of the Institute, from the transitional period of the inside technical production (without data dissemination, announcing every institutional step towards progress) until definitive regularization.

In a just a few months, the INDEC successfully managed to reopen its doors to local and international press, fixed its data calendar, developed and implemented a stylebook, redesigned its website, made its presence official on various social networks, and introduced several statistics dissemination policies.

INDEC: Statistics Dissemination of an Institution in Crisis¹

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Abstract

Since December 2015, the INDEC has been undergoing a process of restoration of its statistical production, its institutional structure and, at the same time, of its functions as the lead agency for official statistics. At the beginning of this process, a necessary diagnosis was made in which communication played, and still plays, a fundamental role as a dimension that encompasses all institutions and social practices. If communication has a transformative potential, then management is the gestation of that change: a process that involves different stages, periods and functions. It is a journey that begins when we take on the challenge of initiating a change in the organization.

With this objective in mind, the Dissemination Directorate planned a qualitative and quantitative - methodologically sound- diagnosis of its human, material, and symbolic resources. The results enabled the devising of strategies to start implementing changes and, at the same time, it became a paradigm for the whole Institute: change had arrived. The survey produced a very clear conclusion: the work environment was affected by the political changes that had afflicted the Institution during the past decade. Thus, the majority of the areas had been transformed into watertight compartments, with limited communication and without responding to any global objectives or programs. For these and other reasons, the teams had become secluded. The greatest damage had been done in symbolic terms: stigmatization, depersonalization, lack of recognition and appreciation that led to a loss of confidence. All this in an area which has a mainly symbolic capital, meant twice the damage. How can we communicate that which we cannot trust? Hence, the adopted strategy was to restore the lost values, strengthen individual and collective abilities and efforts, and break down the barriers -physical and symbolic- which had been put in place to hide and distort information. Thus, a new statistics communication protocol was designed with the objective of promoting social recognition of the functions of the organization, sharing of the information that it produces, democratizing access to information, and restoring the values of autonomy, adequacy and openness.

In only a few months, and in parallel with the reconstruction of the areas that produce the statistical information, the Dissemination Directorate reopened its doors to local and international press, set its Advance Release Calendar, compiled and implemented a Style Manual, redesigned its website, opened official accounts in social media, and launched specific statistics dissemination policies, all this in the midst of the general public's cry for normalisation.

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1. Introduction

The National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) is the technical body that runs the Argentine Public Statistics. It was created by law in 1968 and, throughout history; it has been considered a model of professionalism, technical rigour and reliability among similar institutions. Its operation is regulated by Law [N° 17.622](#), Executive Orders [3110/70](#), [1831/93](#), and Disposition N° [176/99](#) on Statistical Confidentiality.

At the beginning of 2007, the Executive Power virtually intervened the institution. The replacement of professionals and technicians brought about the burgeoning manipulation of data collection procedures and indicator calculations without informing about the new methodologies or providing the public with a basis for such modifications. Thereafter, the INDEC began to be questioned in technical matters, which led to its loss of credibility in the eyes of national and international public opinion during the subsequent years.

After the constitutional government change of December 2015, the new authorities promoted the reconstruction of the Argentine Statistical System based on the following premises:

- To solve the institutional and administrative problems of the Institute;
- to review, in the short term, the inconsistencies within its indicators and implement methodologies approved by the international statistical community;
- and to restore the INDEC as the lead agency for official statistics.

To that end, a specific administrative resource was granted for the term of one calendar year. On 7 January 2016, the National Government declared a state of emergency for the National Statistical System ([Executive Order 55/2016](#)). This would allow the acceleration of the institutional reform and the necessary reviews in order to normalise its operation.

In this context, the new administration of the Dissemination Directorate began its work committed to accompany this process, with two basic objectives: to deliver the technical output of the Institute in a timely and appropriate manner, re-establishing the ethical and professional principles and statistical good practices; and, at the same time, to regain trust by applying an updated direct communication strategy for statistical information users and for the general public.

The point of departure was the conceptualisation of communication as a "field", that is, as a dimension that lies across the institutions and social practices. In this sense, communication is not reduced to being "a means to an end"; it is a complex weave threaded by culture and the different sense productions of society². This means recognizing the transformative potential of communication processes in organizations, as they provide the possibility to re-signify, visualize, or build new configurations, taking into account multiple actors and scenarios.

At this time, we must think of management as associated with the notion of gestation. If communication has transformative potential, then management is the gestation of that change. In this way, management is significantly more than a certain point in time and it cannot be reduced to a stage, let alone an isolated one. Management is a journey that starts even before its implementation; it could be said that it begins at the precise moment in which the challenge of gestating a change in the organization is assumed. It is a process that involves different phases, periods, and functions, such as diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation of results.

² Verón, Eliseo (1993), *La semiosis social. [Social Semiosis] Fragmentos de una teoría de la discursividad [Fragments of a Theory of Discursivity]*, Barcelona, Ed. Gedisa; and Verón, Eliseo (2013), *La semiosis social 2. [Social Semiosis 2] Ideas, momentos, interpretantes.* [Ideas, Periods, Interpreting] Buenos Aires, Paidós Estudios de Comunicación 38. (pp 146-148)

It is a road that we walk with others, and we should recognize and listen to them. This is why we cannot think of it as the mechanical, technical or external implementation of a previously designed plan. Although it is clear that this involves the application of technical and professional knowledge, it is always necessary to discuss and counterpoise this knowledge to the social, cultural and political processes that are built within the organizations.

This point was emphasised during the effective opening of the Institute to the public, the democratization of access to public information, the modernisation and accessibility of communication channels and the restoration of bonds with different user groups by using specific strategies.

All these elements derived in the planning and launching of a holistic communication plan with the objective of granting more clarity, visibility and feedback to the Argentine Public Statistics Restoration Program.

2. Dissemination of Public Statistics

The original layout for the reconstruction of the Dissemination Directorate (DD) is based on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics of the United Nations Statistical Commission³, elaborated in 1992 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which the Institute adopted as an orientating guide for its practice.

In this way, public statistics are viewed as an "indispensable element of the information system of a democratic society" since they provide the public with the basic input to exert its full right to information. Furthermore, they offer essential tools to the different levels of government for the planning of sustainable policies, and to academic and private areas for their research and decision-making.

From there, it is necessary to conceive the most efficient ways of disseminating statistics which will make them accessible and meaningful to different areas of the public. Professionalism, accuracy and objectivity are no longer the sole prevailing elements of statistical production; it is also necessary to disseminate the information in a clear, transparent and efficient way to achieve its comprehension and appropriation.

In its fourth volume of "Making Data Meaningful", the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe argues that raising "statistical literacy" has become a fundamental requirement for effective communication. In this sense, statistical literacy is the public's ability to understand data, for which

³ <http://www.unece.org/stats/archive/docs.fp.e.html>

they need, in addition to certain specific skills, other abilities like a certain literacy level and education, knowledge of the world and of their own areas of interest regarding these matters.⁴

Naturally, the different user groups will possess different interpretation abilities, which means that it is equally relevant to plan variety dissemination strategies according to the particular characteristics of each group.

The dissemination area of an Institution is responsible for both interpreting these processes and putting them into practice. In this sense, it is the last link of a production chain that will later be publicly visible with relevant information, although it is involved in all intermediate processes, since it will have to plan an Advance Release Calendar in different formats, at the beginning of the process.

Within this framework, the first step in the work plan was the delimitation of the Directorate's abilities in objective terms. That is to say, an ideal scheme was designed to define its functions, areas, activities, and user groups that would serve as a guide for the implementation of the overall strategy.

The following aspects were featured:

- **Functions of the DD**

1) To publish the technical output of the Institute in an appropriate time and manner, respecting its ethical and professional principles and the norms of statistical good practices. This involves:

- Planning a Dissemination Calendar and making it public well in advance;
- gathering information from technical production areas;
- formatting said information in accordance with the Style Manual and procedural norms;
- producing the different dissemination formats;
- officially validating statistical output;
- procuring communication channels for the dissemination of products;
- publishing the different products in their appropriate formats and channels;
- managing user and recipient data bases;
- performing the distribution of products whenever required;

2) Meet and satisfy the demand of different user groups regarding information, enquiries, news, and others, through the different channels and formats. Including:

- Giving support and satisfying the demands of different user groups according to their characteristics, needs and possibility of access;
- defining the support and communication channels;

⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2012), *Making Data Meaningful. Part 4: A Guide to Improving Statistical Literacy*, Geneva, United Nations. Available at:
http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2013/Making_Data_Meaningful_4.pdf

- developing personalised dissemination products for the user groups that require them (Special Works);
- enabling subscriptions to products and publication acquisition;
- evaluating the quality of service and communication in its different forms.

3) Boosting access to statistical information by encouraging the active promotion of such information, generating accessible and meaningful content, and facilitating access channels. This involves awareness of the different user groups in order to adjust and channel information according to their needs and interests, and producing dissemination materials to spread through mass media channels and promotional activities.

4) Ensuring that the public has access to visible and available information, organized by topic, date, methodology and production area; and that the links and search engines for technological resources are verified and updated regularly.

- **Areas of Production of the DD**

1. PUBLICATIONS, dedicated to the process of presenting the different editorial outputs, which constitute the official documents of INDEC dissemination.

- Production and editing.
- Design and diagramming.
- Printing and copying.
- Distribution.

2. SERVICES, focused on content supply and management, in addition to assisting internal and external user groups through different traditional communication channels and new interactive digital media:

- Content: drafting and graphic, audio-visual and digital production.
- Digital communication: publications in website, email and social media.
- Connections with the media: institutional press and advertising.
- Citizen information: user support through virtual and physical platforms and library; relations with the education community; and special works for qualified, academic and business users.
- Organization of events and marketing; institutional participation in events, fairs and conferences of different types; diagramming of visual material and signage and institutional promotion for different activities.

User Groups

- Qualified users (academics, economists, statistical analysts, officials and specialised students): use the data in studies and projections.
- National, provincial and municipal public bodies: resort to statistical information when generating projects and planning public policy.

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- Media: disseminates the information produced by the Institute or information produced by third-parties based on their own data.
 - General Public: accesses the production of the organization either through the media or direct channels.
 - Internal users: staff with functions within the Institute.

Dissemination and Communication Channels

- Editorial publications
- Website and contact form
- Social media
- Email
- Virtual and telephone support centre
- Library and consultation room
- Media Liaison Office
- Participation in events and conferences of specific and general interest.

Dissemination Formats

- Advance release calendar: to set publication dates for indicators on a semi-annual basis.
- Technical reports: to give official information to the press and the general public on different indicators, on the dates established in the calendar.
- INDEC Informa: monthly newsletter, in digital and printed form, that gathers a variety of information for subscribed users.
- Argentine Republic Statistical Yearbook: annual publication, in printed and digital form, on the whole statistical output of the organization.
- Periodic publications, in printed and digital form, with the objective of explaining the indicators.
- Collections and dissertations, printed and digital, on methodological studies and surveys.
- Publications catalogue: informs users and subscribers about new publications and available material.
- Dissemination and awareness brochures.
- Press releases.

3. Development of the Work Plan

3.1 Diagnosis

In order to implement this scheme, it was necessary to restore this area that, given the previously described conditions, was found in a state of particular disarticulation and virtual paralysation of its information dissemination function, which was precisely what was being disparaged.

At the beginning of the administration, in December 2015, a general survey was performed to evaluate the actual state of the resources and procedures of each area. The objective was to obtain an account of the initial scenario in order to record any changes to be made and monitor the organisational advances implemented to optimise the statistical production.

Firstly, a methodologically sound quantitative and qualitative diagnosis of the human, material and symbolic resources was performed. The results obtained allowed the drafting of the work strategy and, at the same time, became a paradigm for the whole institute: change had arrived.

The survey yielded a very clear conclusion: the work environment was tainted by the political conflicts that had affected the organization in the previous years. The majority of the areas had been transformed into watertight compartments, with limited communication and without responding to any global objectives or programs.

The work teams, in particular, which amounted to around a hundred employees, had had their essential tasks affected:

- In the case of the institutional press area, there was no fulfilment of tasks, since these were plainly carried out in offices outside the INDEC. Thus, there was no updated media or journalists mass mailing to simultaneously and impartially inform about the publication of the indicators stipulated in the Dissemination Calendar.
- the outreach area of the institution was reduced to producing content for publications, since the Institution did no longer take part in national or international conferences and fairs;
- the user services sectors (consulting rooms, remote and telephone services, library, publications and special works sales) suffered a reduction of information demand and response rates as a result of the lack of credibility towards the Institute;
- the design and revision of reports was also reduced, since most were disseminated directly from the General Directorate office;
- the website presented a confusing layout, which encumbered the visualization of information; and the graphic and audio-visual content team was not tasked with any autonomous production projects regarding dissemination material directed to users, respondents and/or the general public;
- the bonds with the educational community were twisted in regard to their content and transmission modes.

Because of these reasons and the harassment suffered by the professionals and technicians with the objective of subjecting them to discretionary directives, the teams became secluded. The greatest damage was in symbolic terms: stigmatization, depersonalization, lack of recognition and appreciation that led to a loss of confidence. All this in an area which has a mainly symbolic working capital meant twice the damage. How do we communicate that which we cannot trust?

Thus, data dissemination in its different forms and specific consultation services were drastically deteriorated due to the fact that all information was submitted to previous censorship and arbitrary decision-making by directors whose interests were limited to answering to the political circumstances ordered by a government.

3.2 Strategy and Objectives

Needless to say, this scenery meant working from the bottom up, in a context of distrust and resentment. Hence, the adopted strategy was to restore the lost values, strengthen individual and collective abilities and efforts, and break down the barriers -physical and symbolic- that had been put in place to hide and distort information.

In this sense, a new statistics communication plan was designed, with the following objectives:

- To promote social awareness of the functions of the organization, sharing of the knowledge that it produces, democratizing access to information, and restoring the values of autonomy, adequacy and openness.
- To review, plan and manage a holistic communication plan, aimed at making the most of the human resources and installed capacity; and to optimize the communicational production of the existing areas through coordinated action among them.
- To collaborate in the transformation process of the Institute, from the transition phase of its internal statistical production (without dissemination of data, but with the announcement of every intermediate development in the Institute) to its definitive normalisation -following the reestablishment of all of its basic indicators- with the development of a future self-sufficient organisational frame.

Following this design, the work scheme was redrawn in a manner that would allow the fulfilment of these objectives once the available resources were organised and optimised.

3.3 Work Lines

In the beginning, a decision was made to readjust both the human resources and work teams of the DD and its physical space.

According to the different profiles obtained during the diagnosis, coordinators were designated for publication and services areas with the objective of organising and integrating the groups. In addition, each member's potential was harnessed and directed towards existing tasks in order to avoid recruiting new staff, which also boosted motivation among collaborators.

Regarding the physical space, offices that had been previously isolated were opened to improve communication among work teams and dynamically interrelate their functionalities, ensuring that all areas operate within adequate health standard conditions. Furthermore, technical equipment was replaced to update the available work tools.

At the same time, in order to strengthen the institutional identity and restore the links with the different user groups, the following lines of action were implemented:

Restoration of the Annual Release Calendar: the General Directorate of the institution established as a first step the complete restoration of public statistics, which meant organizing and working with the technical directorates of the Institute to produce the official publications calendar for 2016, in critical conditions, since the review processes of each area ran in parallel with the production of new information. The arrangement of the output routine of press reports following an internationally approved protocol became the first indication of the paradigm shift which had begun in the institution. In March, an advance release calendar for the month was disclosed, and by April, the Annual Calendar had been completed.

Digitalisation and content access: the developments in Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) call for statistical production institutions' incorporation to this global tendency. The INDEC is not oblivious to this demand and has started to provide, in its website, digitalised information from its library sources (censuses, periodic publications, collections, survey questionnaires, field manuals and instructions, awareness material, etc.) until the completion of its whole historic production. Additionally, in the framework of Open Data⁵ associated to Central Administration's Open Government policy, the Institute now provides free digital material, which can be located in the website platform. However, information is still distributed in other required formats, such as printed publications, aimed at those users who prefer or tend to use this format, and to ensure access in regions of the country that still do not have the digital means.

Connections to the media: journalism is an indispensable intermediary with general public opinion. Thus, it is essential to provide it with permanent, verified and responsible information in line with the principles of the Institute. For this reason, and to recover lost bonds, open conferences were held with specialized journalists, communications specialists and media editors. Contact was restored through press conferences after the release of each indicator, allowing the liaison with the data producing areas and the detailed consultation for a precise understanding of the issued information. The specialised press and media liaison area, which answers and channels specific demand within a professional respect framework, was strengthened; at the same time, the website consultation sector was expanded by adding information of interest, images, graphics, videos and specific documents.

Implementation of social media presence: until the beginnings of 2016, the Institute did not have an official presence in the commonly used social media platforms. That is why new Twitter, Facebook and YouTube channels were created, with the objective of expanding accessibility of the community to the Institute's information output.

Redesign of the website: There was a reformulation of the design and content placement of the institutional website to ease visualization and localization of all statistical resources. Additionally, a mobile version was created to enable access through multiple devices.

⁵ Open Data Plan, Decree 117/2016, Ministry of Modernisation www.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/255000-259999/257755/norma.htm; National Public Data System Program, Resolution 538/2013, Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers www.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/215000-219999/218131/norma.htm; Access to Public Information, Decree 1172/2003 www.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/90000-94999/90763/norma.htm

Awareness campaign: to communicate the new Argentine public statistics production model to the community, campaigns were disseminated through mass and social media. By seeking to spread widely the Institute’s reconstruction message, we pursue both the objective of obtaining a greater response rate in data gathering for different indicators and of restoring the reliability bonds with the public opinion.

Devising of explanatory communication products: to support the indicators, in a clear language and attractive design, dissemination material in audio-visual, digital and printed forms was distributed, with the objective of achieving a better and greater understanding of information for the users. As an example of this, we can resort to the INDEC DD’s first institutional video⁶, produced by its own staff, to communicate its mission and work in a dynamic way to the largest possible audience. The DD also created an illustrated booklet on the methodologies used for the Consumer Price Index⁷, which offers a meaningful explanation on an indicator that has always been of great importance to Argentine public opinion, although the public was not usually aware of its range and complex measurement mechanisms.

Connections with the educational community: we work on the reformulation of the statistical liaison with different educational levels, through the design of the first tools that children will use to comprehend and use public statistics. The INDEC is committed to this within the general framework of increasing the available number of tools for the new generations to participate and have access to knowledge. The Educational Establishments Visitation Calendar is in its final stages.

Development of a Style Manual: with the objective of unifying criteria and consolidating the conceived institutional identity, a Style Manual was published, for the first time in the history of the Institute, that defines the suggested formats and procedures for the dissemination of the information produced by the INDEC.⁸

4. Reflections for the Future

When an institution has lost its credibility, the communication strategy that is necessary for its normalization is complex and requires a multilateral approach. Reverting the initial situation of media reference to INDEC generally involving conflictive or controversial topics and managing to limit media appearances to dissemination of products cannot be done in one day.

However, after only a few months of this methodological information recovery process, we can already see the results and the clear approval signs from public opinion and specific user groups. This has been the result of the colossal amount of work of a multidisciplinary team focused on

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7k7SRXzxfM>

⁷ http://www.indec.gov.ar/ftp/cuadros/economia/ipc_que_es_06_16.pdf

⁸ http://www.indec.gov.ar/ftp/cuadros/poblacion/manual_estilo_indec_2016.pdf

giving Argentina back the real opportunity of having a robust and lasting tool for making both private and public decisions.

In the specific area of Dissemination, the decision was to recapture the spirit of the United Nations General Assembly guidelines ([A/RES/51/172, 1996](#)) to strengthen the "two-way communication systems that enable dialogue and that allow communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in the decisions that relate to their development".

This external and internal multi-level paradigm shift, which includes "listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change", in the sense described by the Rome Consensus⁹, to achieve lasting transformations is essential for taking on the immediate challenge of generating collective reliability.

In this sense, the mass media has broadly displayed openness towards the new layout of the INDEC by actively following institutional changes, through its massive presence in press conferences and other invitations, as well as the transmission of information produced and disseminated by the body as a primary source.

To this end, it was necessary to undergo a process of re-learning together with the press who, after years of political exploitation of untrue and incorrect data -which were sometimes even discretionally anticipated by the highest authority of the Executive Power on national television-, began to regain a routine of consultation of the official bulletin board for the timely and adequate transmission of the information produced by the Institute. Social media also played an important role in this task, since it provided a better visualisation and accessibility to the content produced by the Institute.

We can affirm that the restoration of norms adjusted to international quality standards, together with the establishment of clear objectives based on transparency, openness and other mentioned values, was the starting signal of a project that, before long, began to show satisfactory results. Naturally, we had in our favour the generalised public interest and demand for the truth about a country which had long lost any sense of its place in the world due to the loss of its key indicators.

This idea of citizenry, conceived as persons with demands and proposals entering the public sphere, involves communication as an essential factor for its existence, since it exerts two main functions: to present information in the public space and to collectivise their interests (Mata et al, 2007).

For this reason, in a statistics-producing body, communication is vital and contributes to a democratic and participative structure. The desired result is, in consequence, the social awareness and identification with data that the INDEC provides by means of scientific tools, as a State entity.

⁹ The World Congress on Communication for Development Rome, Italy, October 2006. Available at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTDEVCOMMENG/Resources/RomeConsensus07.pdf>

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