

Innovation in the use of social media by national statistical offices

Vienie Botha (Statistics South Africa)

vienieb@statssa.gov.za

Abstract and Paper

National statistical offices are an important source of information that is used to measure progress of a country and its people. However, the traditional methods of releasing statistics make it difficult for the average citizen to comprehend the value of official statistics to their lives. The use of social media channels and data visualisation techniques has made statistics more accessible to the person on the street.

Social media use by government and statistical agencies around the world has been on the rise over the past few years. Audience participation and engagement on social media channels, and the growth thereof, has necessitated a shift in how information is packaged and communicated.

Social media has drastically changed the way organisations and their followers engage. Communication is no longer linear. In the digital-age it has now progressed to becoming multi-directional, multi-channel, multi-participant, immediate and interactive.

Statistics South Africa has been using social media as an additional contact point and dissemination platform since 2010, increasing its reach and brand awareness. The nature of social media (perceived as having mass reach, immediate impact, fluidity and fast-pace) makes continued monitoring and innovation vital to maximise the impact of messages delivered.

Stats SA has been continually measuring the effectiveness of messages used and engagement levels on the two main social media channels used, namely Twitter and Facebook. This paper will cover the unique challenges and experiences of using the social media space as a national statistical agency in Africa. It will also explore the various innovations and changes made in the use of social media by Stats SA to communicate and disseminate statistical information in South Africa, ensuring that a broader audience in various population and socio-economic groups is reached, thus creating a better understanding of the importance of statistical information.

Innovation in the use of social media by national statistical offices.

Introduction

National statistical offices are an important source of information that is used to measure progress of a country and its people. However, the traditional methods of releasing statistics make it difficult for the average citizen to comprehend the value of official statistics to their lives. The use of social media channels and data visualisation techniques made statistics more accessible to the person on the street.

Social media use by government and statistical agencies around the world has been on the rise over the past few years. Audience participation and engagement on social media channels, and the growth thereof, has necessitated a shift in how information is packaged and communicated.

Social media drastically changed the way organisations and their followers engage. Communication is no longer linear. In the digital-age it now progressed to becoming multi-directional, multi-channel, multi participant, immediate and interactive.

Statistics South Africa has been using social media as an additional contact point and dissemination platform since 2010, increasing its reach and brand awareness. The nature of social media (perceived as having mass reach, immediate impact, fluidity and fast-pace) makes continued monitoring and innovation vital to maximise the impact of messages delivered.

Stats SA has been continually measuring the effectiveness of messages used and engagement levels on the two main social media channels used, namely Twitter and Facebook.

Stats SA and social media

In the current age of increased digital access, it is not optimal to use traditional media alone to communicate and disseminate information. Social media became an integral part in communicating with and reaching new audiences. Although it increased the reach and impact of Stats SA's messages and statistics, it is also important not to use social media in isolation. It must be used in conjunction with and supplemented by the use of traditional media and communication channels.

Stats SA releases over 300 publications annually. These cover a wide range of areas in both economic and social statistics that can add value to government, decision and policy makers, business as well as private citizens in South Africa. It is therefore imperative that these statistics be communicated and disseminated in a way that reaches the right audience.

In the run-up to the 2011 Census in South Africa social media was introduced to enhance the reach and create more awareness around the census and the value an accurate census will add to the country.

Using a big event like Census 2011 assisted the organisation in growing its presence on social media, setting the foundation for a successful future for the organisation on social media.

Audience and content:

In doing a basic analysis of the audience that needs to be catered for when communicating and disseminating data, three groups have been identified.

These are:

1. The statistically literate and aware (ex academics/economists/researchers)
2. Those interested in data (such as the media/government/policy makers)
3. General public with lower levels of statistical awareness and literacy.

The challenge in communicating information and creating a more statistically aware and literate society mainly arises with the latter two audiences.

This is where social media and its content created plays a major role. The way we present data during press conferences evolved, making it easier to understand and share by the various media houses to their audiences.

With regards to the third audience group, we have been focussing heavily on generating content that will resonate with our followers and their friends and followers raising the likelihood of sharing the content.

This was achieved in identifying national and international days and holidays and finding accessible data that speaks to these days and the themes around it.

Here again there are two different kinds of content. The more serious and official days such as International Aids Day, Tuberculosis Day, World Mother Language Day and World Women's day.

There is also a lighter side that we bring to our content and this generally receives a lot of attention and interaction on our social media platforms. These include International Coffee Day, International Beer Day, International Whiskey Day and Valentines Day.

This kind of content performs well on Twitter and Facebook as there is already a general thread and conversation on the platforms around the content. We use this to our advantage to maximise the reach of our information.

We have also been increasing the use of video on our YouTube channel and Facebook as well as adjusting the focus and content of the video.

What started out as a short video relaying the general findings of a survey or release such as the monthly mining production or retail trade sales figures or even the Consumer Price Index had to be re-evaluated once views on these videos started declining sending us back to the drawing board.

This resulted in a change in approach. Many of the audience will hear the numbers but won't understand the need for it or what it means for them resulting in them not returning to view new content. We started focussing on using more plain language in the videos as much as possible

and also explaining the reasons for the surveys as well as how it affects an individual. This is particularly true for our videos pertaining to CPI. We monitor social media and media trends for the month and focus on items in the CPI basket that was talked about during the month. This then again harnesses the thread and conversation that is already there and gives additional exposure to our content and social media platforms.

Managing of accounts

The content used on social media is vital. Just as important is the monitoring and management of the channels.

Social media is fast, immediate and interactive. Sharing content but being unresponsive to comments or questions that arise negates the will good achieved.

Real time and immediacy of social media resulted in the channels being used as an additional channel to access information faster. Users are aware of the fact that brands and organisations tend to be more responsive on an outwardly facing public platform, thus resulting in a faster turnaround time on any queries or questions.

If the monitoring of these active social media channels are not monitored regularly it could lead to comments and queries missed resulting in a negative connotation to the organisation.

Conclusion:

Social media is a fluid and ever evolving beast. It is very important to stay abreast of the latest trends and developments to stay relevant and increase engagement and conversation levels.

This requires continued innovations. It doesn't necessarily mean big changes or reinventing the wheel, but one has to continue changing.

Stats SA has been very lucky in that there is buy-in from the organisation in harnessing and using social media to communicate and share information. This made the journey much easier.

Creating content that resonates with people gives Stats SA access to a whole new and mostly untapped audience in the average citizen and non-statistical users that has not been exposed to statistics and the value that lies therein.

This in turn exposes them to the organisation and the work it does. This is very important to an organisation that is reliant on the citizens of the country to allow us to collect individual or household data on a continued basis, thus creating an informed society.

Not only has there been an increase in the following and reach, engagement levels also rose and the content is used in local as well as national online, print and television media.

The success in the content created and use of social media to share it, resulted in Stats SA being among the Top 10 South African Government departments active on social media.

By **Vienie Botha**,

Deputy Director: Social Media and Content Management, Statistics South Africa

Email: vienieb@statssa.gov.za