Official statistics and social media: a challenge for NSIs to better communicate with all audience cohorts: Istat case history
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Abstract

For statistical organizations Communication and Dissemination strategies have traditionally focused on the expert users, but in a nowadays changing environment they must learn to communicate directly with all citizens and to improve statistical literacy across all audience cohorts. Moreover, in a ‘deluge’ of data producers, NSIs are the ‘guarantors’ of statistics quality and they have to consolidate their reputation and the confidence of citizens in official statistics.

In the meanwhile, the worldwide success of social platforms changed even the communication model: from a vertical communication (one to many) to a horizontal one in which everyone is on the same level. Social media today is a powerful communication tool, with social networks being one of the most dominant ways we now communicate. The rules of engagement between an institution (or a business) and their audience have shifted.

Social media are considered as broadcasting channels with high potential to reach the target audience, yet inexpensive, versatile and often interoperable with each other. Social networks can also enlarge the audience and encourage interactivity with citizens, enabling listening, involvement and engagement.

How do these new trends shape the way we are communicating with policy makers, stakeholders and the general audience?

Since 2010 Istat decided to be present on more than one social media. Through these channels Istat changed its point of view and established a privileged way of communication with traditional and new generation stakeholders.

As many other INSs, Istat also decided to use the social channels to convey statistical contents to more and more increasing audiences.
The strategy adopted since the beginning by Istat has been to fully exploit the potential offered by social channels, that is interactivity.

Our flagship platform is Twitter for its innate characteristics and for its users (institutions, policy makers, old and new journalists, network influencers, stakeholders and common citizens). In particular, Istat always interacts with its followers responding timely to each individual question. Moreover, it uses the channel as a 'Guide to an appropriate and effective use of data', monitoring and intervening in case of data misuse.

A new challenge has been launched recently with the opening of an institutional account on Instagram.

In this case, the goal is to 'bring the official statistics on Instagram' reaching an even more general audience compared to Twitter, combining simple statistical messages with images or short movies (that are the main contents of this platform), operating within a dedicated strategic plan.

*Key words: web, social network, information, communication, innovation, social platform, new media.*
**Official statistics and social media: a challenge for NSIs to better communicate with all audience cohorts: Istat case**

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1. Introduction

In the past, Statistical Organizations traditionally focused their Communication and Dissemination strategies on the expert users, but in a nowadays changing environment they had to learn to communicate directly with all citizens and to improve statistical literacy across all audience cohorts. Moreover, in a ‘deluge’ of data, NSIs are the ‘guarantors’ of statistics quality and they have to consolidate their reputation and citizens’ confidence in official statistics.

In the meanwhile, the worldwide success of social platforms changed even the communication model: from a vertical communication (one to many) to a horizontal one in which everyone is on the same level.

So, what it was a monologue - virtual, but still a monologue - is now a ‘crowd of voices’, where branding and positioning of one’s organization are increasingly controlled by supporters and detractors.

Social media today are a powerful communication tool, being one of the most dominant ways we now communicate. Even for a Statistical Organization is therefore necessary to be present on social media ‘because everyone is there’, but also because the way of surfing the Internet has changed. Indeed, the general trend is no longer the one of reading the news directly on newspapers sites, but that of passing first from Facebook or Twitter pages to find here starting points that may be of our interest and links to click on for further details. In short, we tend to build our personal ‘screen’ online collecting from various sources those news interesting for us.

The rules of engagement between an Institution (or a business) and their audience have shifted. Social media are considered as broadcasting channels with high potential to reach the target audience, yet inexpensive, versatile and often interoperable with each other. They can also enlarge the audiences of an Institution and encourage interactivity with citizens, enabling listening, involvement and engagement. In the recent past, indeed, Statistical Organizations could only spread messages using their website. Today everyone instead believes that where there is no chance of interaction with an Institution, it means that one lacks transparency. As we know, transparency, quality and enlargement of the audience of users are essential elements for Statistical Institutions to increasingly tighten the relationship of trust with their respondents.

2. Context

As we have seen, social media’s influence has raised and become part of our everyday life. In fact, more than 4 billion people in the whole world use Internet (Jan 2018, +7% compared to Jan 2017) for an average of 6 hours each one per day, YouTube has about 1,500 million monthly active users’ accounts, Instagram has about 800 million monthly active users and Twitter has about 330 million monthly active users.
So we’re using this connectivity in almost every aspect of our lives, whether it’s chatting with friends, playing games, researching products, tracking our health. As a result, brands and Institutions need to evolve beyond today’s approach to digital, and build seamless digital integration into everything they do.¹

Image 1. Active users social platform in the world (in millions, January 2018)

What about Italy? More than 43 million people use Internet (+10% compared to Jan 2017), and 34 million (57% of Italians) are active social media users, who spend almost two hours a day using various social channels.

The most used social media in Italy is YouTube, 62% of Italian social media users, followed by Facebook with 60%, Instagram with 33%, Google+ 25% and Twitter at 23%.

All these percentages clearly explain why today a social media strategy is essential for any business.

Image 2. Most active social platform in Italy (% January 2018)

Which ones can be the main strategies related to a communication via social media?

- social listening strategy: normally, this is the initial choice that organizations make when they appear on social media. It's a very inexpensive way of being on social channels, but indeed very useful;
- project strategy: it usually involves social media in a defined period of time to promote or launch a specific project. On average expensive;
- promotion strategy: it is adopted to support the launch of a campaign or of a single initiative. Here too, the organizational effort is limited, but the potential of the tool is not fully exploited;
- active controlling strategy: it is chosen when the presence on social media is considered of utmost importance for the organization. It is the most demanding both from an economic point of view and for the required use of resources.

Of course, the above-mentioned strategies may be adopted in a diversified way according to the channel on which it is decided to apply them.

3. New challenges: Istat strategy and actions

How do these new trends shape the way Istat communicates with policy makers, stakeholders and the general audience? Since 2010 Istat decided to be present on more than one social media channel. Through these platforms our Institute changed its point of view setting itself the following goals:

- to reposition the authority and popularity already gained through traditional media;
- to intercept new information needs emerging from the bottom and targets that may not be reached by the Institutional communication strategy alone;
- to strengthen a direct and immediate dialogue with citizens that makes possible to concretize the principles of transparency, effectiveness and efficiency of the administrative action;
- to establish a privileged channel of communication with traditional and new generation stakeholders.

We understood that the planning of one’s presence on social media was no longer an accessory element, but it had to become an integral part of a precise strategy of active presence on the web. The question was on which channels our brand should participate and how, because it is crucial a strategic framework for their use when one is acting within a complex frame of relationships. What makes the difference is finding the right approach.

As many other NSIs, Istat also decided to use the social channels to convey statistical contents to more and more increasing audiences.

Now, we are present with a corporate account on the following social platforms (Facebook only for special events, in the past, with dedicated pages):

Image 3. Istat social platform (May 2018)
The management of all these channels is under the responsibility of the Communication Directorate.

Since the beginning Istat, especially on Twitter, distinguished itself by the ability and will to converse with all its audiences, in one word: interactivity. A will that was not even obvious in those that already made use of social channels before us.

The social media dedicated team is made up of different professional roles, each one with different tasks and skills:

- 1 social media strategist (who defines the corporate strategy on social media and coordinates the team)
- 3 persons for the live twitting of institutional events and for posting contents on Instagram, YouTube and Flickr (they represent the voice of the brand; they publish the contents and interact with followers)
- 1 person for daily tweets from data released according to the annual or weekly calendar
- 1 person for updating contents in platforms such as Pinterest, SlideShare
- 1 statistician for conception and design of multimedia products with statistical content
- 1 person for the conception and design of multimedia products to promote events or e-books
- 1 graphic designer
- 1 videogemaker for audio video shooting and eventual film editing.

However, all these resources deal also with other business (mainly press office and relations with users). The team constantly monitors and updates contents Monday to Friday and even on Saturdays and Sundays on special occasions (such as Christmas or Easter).

Moreover, the team carries out quarterly analysis reports.

4. Istat on Twitter

Our flagship platform is Twitter (as Istat we have a verified account) for its innate characteristics and for its users (Institutions, policy makers, old and new journalists, bloggers, network influencers, stakeholders and common citizens). In particular, Istat interacts with its followers responding timely to each individual question. Moreover, it uses the channel as a 'Guide to an appropriate and effective use of data', monitoring and intervening in case of data misuse.

At the moment we have 2 accounts: @istat_it (about 60,300 followers), @istat_en (about 2,000 followers). Those who follow our 2 accounts are not automatically followed. Analysis of followers, however, is guaranteed to adopt appropriate methods of communication and content.

Any comments, suggestions and ideas from followers are welcome. We do not answer any tweet unless the topic is deemed useful and the communication style adequate.

The first approach we had in opening the institutional channel on Twitter was to set ourselves specific aims, such as:

- to disseminate statistical information in real time helping all our users in using them in the appropriate way (following the calendar of Istat editorial outputs)
- to intervene in case of misuse of data
to draw citizens to the life of our Institute, even reaching targets that may not be touched by the 'traditional' means of a corporate communication

to establish a privileged communication channel with traditional and new generation stakeholders in addition to the Institutional website and Rss feeds

to promote the role of our Institute in the democratic process of the Country

to realize live twitting for relevant events

to intercept information needs emerging from the bottom

to enhance the Institute's historical and cultural heritage (as we did on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of Istat since its foundation - it happened on 2016 - celebrated with various initiatives and products, including a historical exhibition within the Vittoriano Museum complex of Rome)

Then, in continuity with the expressed need to aggregate different categories of audience, we gave attention to the tone of voice that required to focus on empathy because people like to talk to other people, not robots; this does not mean giving up an institutional tone: modulating the voice is possible! Moreover, it’s important to listen in order to understand how to move. Following these principles we established that our tone of voice should always be:

- both Institutional and dynamic
- messages comprehensible to anyone, limiting technicalities
- didactic and explanatory tweets
- built on simple and direct phrases, without using emoticons.

We also discussed the use of ‘hashtag or not’ and established that it does not contradict the institutional tone of the account. Hashtags should be used with criteria, they are an important tool of communication but also of listening and monitoring and they help to perceive the sentiment on a specific theme. We therefore divided them into 3 categories:

- original hashtags, to connote each category of content in our tweets (i.e. special events – like #RapportoCompetitività or others for the dissemination of our data as #export and #import)
- #istat, already widespread, is always used in all our tweets
- pre-existing hashtags, to insert tweets in topics already discussed online (i.e. special world day as the #WordBookDay)
- #dateoftheday (ex: #23aprile).

Finally, aware of the importance of a proper planning to achieve effective communication on social platforms, we decided to systematize a weekly editorial plan that could vary according to the events on the calendar. In the daily management, it was decided to post several times on the same day equal contents, paying attention to the topics of the day (eg: World and National days).
No automation is used to post messages (i.e. RSS feeds), with the exception of **tweetdeck** when we have the elements to program the posting of a tweet on a given day and at a given time.

Tweets are written and posted exclusively by the social media dedicated team.

Summing up, here are our main actions as regards our Twitter account:

- **Content distribution**: content production (infographics, videos, meme, live news of our events..) and packaging of the tweets (text, hashtag, link together with photo, video or graphics);
- **Listening**: monitoring the timeline (what our followers say) and sharing contents within the staff;
- **Interactions**
- **Retweet**
- **Customer service**: data requests or clarifications on data.

As a result of all the above said considerations, a **Social Media Policy** has been drafted and published on the official website with a link to the bio of our Twitter account.

### 4.1 istat.it: key figures

It is one of the peculiar phases of a social media active presence.

Even using only the tools offered by the social channel itself, one can extract useful data for the updating of the strategy (in terms of communication aims, best contents for messages, reference audience and effectiveness of the chosen tools).

At the moment istat.it has about 60,500 followers, 9,300 tweets and 3,100 photos and videos.

Among the Twitter accounts of the other National Statistical Institutes in Europe, istat.it is actually the fourth in terms of number of followers.

In the first quarter of 2018, istat.it with 343 tweets had 1,195,000 views, 36,100 visits, 3,321 mentions and it registered 2,166 new followers.
# Table 1. Key figures of istat_it (I quarter 2018)

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<td>76</td>
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<td>February</td>
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<td>March</td>
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<td>405,000</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>1,195,000</td>
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<td>3,321</td>
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#istat is frequently among the trending topics hashtag of the day, for instance in April 2018 #istat was in trending topics for 6 times. In addition, in 2017 we noticed that 33,541 users visited our website www.istat.it moving from Twitter, while in 2016 it happened only for 8,977 users (+274%) (source: our website analytics).

Image 6. #istat ‘What’s Trending?’ (April 2018)

Image 7. Twitter Analytics: views Friday, April 27 2018
Last April 27 and 28 we released ‘Noi Italia’, a web publication which analyses the position of Italy compared to the other European Countries on demographic, social environmental and economic fields. In these days we posted 23 tweets using the #NoiItalia hashtag and the performance was very good: 106,441 views, 734 retweets and 462 like.

5. Istat on Instagram

A new challenge has been recently launched with the opening of an Institutional account on Instagram. Instagram defines itself as ‘a free smartphone app used to capture and share the world’s moments. Instagram is a fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures and videos’. Therefore, this platform is synonymous with photography, starting from the premise that visual communication arrives and it is perceived 50 times faster than a written text. Moreover, in order not to encourage its users to exit the app, Instagram does not allow the insertion of clickable links.

Which are the performances of this social platform in Italy? The following one is a recent usage analysis of this social platform in Italy:

Image 8. Instagram usage analysis in Italy (January 2018)

As we did for Twitter, first of all we stopped to reflect on specific objectives that we aimed to reach opening a profile on this social platform, concluding that in this case the main goal should be ‘telling the stories (and the history) of Istat, for a narration beyond the simple repeat of news, press releases and appointments’.

A strategic plan has so been developed. It implies one different type of content for each day of the working week, identified through a related hashtag. With the support of our graphic designers (in staff to the Communication Directorate), ad hoc layouts have been created to convey the stories of Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. That’s in order to guarantee, even in this case, our brand identity.

The strategic plan is articulated in the following way:
- **Monday** is the day of #Istat: our organization opens its doors posting photos that represent its buildings (or specific details of them), employees at work or attending international meetings and so on.
- **Tuesday** is the day of #Italyinfigures: Istat describes the Country through informative pills supported by evocative images.
- **Wednesday** is the day of #Doyouknowthat: we post curious and fun statistics because on Instagram the emotional component has a preponderant role and curiosity is one of the emotions that work the most.
- **Thursday** is the day of ‘nostalgia’, that is another of the most important components on Instagram. For this reason our posts are related to ‘how Istat was yesterday’. Our organization has a very full archive of historical photos. Therefore, every Thursday we evoke a piece of our history through vintage photos accompanied by a caption that tells the context. The connotative hashtag is #ThrowbackThursday.
- **Fryday** is the day dedicated to tell a bit larger story on ‘pop issues’ trough figures (how Italians go to work, which sports they practice, grandfathers and nephews, natality in Italy and so on). The most used tool is the mp4 format while the connotative hashtag is #fridaystatistics.

The use of hashtags on Instagram is essential to give a wider appeal at one's posts, even more than Twitter. Therefore, in addition to the chosen connotative hashtag, we always use other hashtags such as #Istat, #statistics, one linked to the day of the week (example #Monday) and those that evoke the proposed topic of that day (eg #population).

Once defined the strategic plan and opened the institutional account, our efforts have been addressed to make ourselves known into the Instagram world. We so started to follow other profiles because this is fundamental. On a reputational point of view such a behavior ensures a positive perception: Istat looks like a communicative organization ‘staying on the social platforms in the right way’, that means not simply providing contents and this is a first way to start earning followers. As a consequence, we first focused our attention on Instagram accounts of other Statistical Organizations, Italian and European Institutions, newspapers and magazines and Istat employees particularly active on social networks, finding day by day other interesting Instagrammers. In a second time the strategic plan has been enriched by further contents, with the aim to give visibility to special events or initiatives of particular relevance for our organization. In these cases, we can post speakers’ slides as well as a photo collage or a short videos on the event, always produced by our social media team. Finally, in order to increase the ‘virality’ of these posts, we also mention other organizations involved in the same event if they have an account on Instagram.

### 5.1 iStat.it: key figures

At the moment, we have about 250 posts, more than 1,200 followers. In the first two months our posts had an average of 20 likes each one, while in April 2018 they reached an average of 50 likes per single post. The posts with more likes are the one with the photo illustrating the Istat opening ceremony (a picture dated 1926) and the photos of Istat central offices in Rome under the snow (last February). The video with more views is ‘How satisfied are we?’ (357 views), followed by the video homemade on the occasion of the Women’s Day (290 views). More generally, videos with data have more views than promotional videos of events or e-books.
Starting from these figures we are drawing an evaluation framework of our first months on Instagram. It should help us to maximize the communicative effectiveness of our posts and the efficiency of the productive processes. Among the undertaken actions we are conducting a publication test at different times of the day to check which ones are the best moments for posting contents that reach more people. Studies on this theme indicate that the posts receive more ‘likes’ if they are published when people are not busy at work, as early in the morning, at lunchtime and in the evening, but in our case this is not always what it happens.

With the support of our graphic designers, we are also working on a restyling of the current layouts. More than other social platforms, Instagram requires a continuous search for new visual forms and new contents able of intercepting increasingly important segments of its vast audience. We are also reasoning about other content innovations of the strategic plan: for example on Thursday, the day of nostalgia, the idea is to enhance the great heritage of our historical statistics with informative pills focused on ‘the way we were’.

**Other Istat social platforms**

*SlideShare:* this social platform mainly targets researchers and students and it is particularly important for Istat because allows us to carry out a viral dissemination of the results of our research works. In fact, on slideshare the speakers' slides are uploaded for every Istat event. Actually, at the web address http://www.slideshare.net/slideistat, we have 1,589 presentations organized by event and tag, with more than 16 million views in the first quarter of 2018.

*YouTube:* since October 2010 (http://www.youtube.com/vidoeistat) Istat has opened its YouTube channel that aims at an undifferentiated target. Today it has 35 playlists and more than 359 uploaded videos that reproduce different Institute experiences: presentation of editorial products, video tutorials, reports and interviews, television broadcasts and events. Its performance in the first quarter of 2018 is equal to 5,930 views and 7,929 minutes of watch time.

*Flickr:* at the address http://www.flickr.com/photos/galleria_istat 55 albums are online, more than 1,158 photos, which collect photos of the top management and those of the main events of Istat. This account primarily targets at the media and institutional publics.

*Pinterest:* the choice to open this channel (https://it.pinterest.com/istat_infograf/) arose from the fact that Istat has decided to focus more on communication through visualization and infographics products. The Istat account has three bulletin boards: socio-demographic infographics (infographics on population and society, 38 pins), economic infographics (the economics and environment infographics, 19 pins) and data visualization in Istat (interactive infographics and choropleth maps, 9 pins). At the moment this channel with 63 pins has more than 170 followers and almost 1,000 views per month.

*Storify:* in October 2013 Istat opened its account on Storify (https://storify.com/istat). This social channel allows to tell stories through the merge of pieces taken from other social networks (Twitter, flickr, Instagram, youtube, etc.), thus exploiting the viral effect because in addition to the social content of those who tell the story, one can integrate social contents from other authors. The channel is mainly dedicated to tell the main events that Istat organizes. It has been inaugurated on the occasion of the Data lab #censimenti, a laboratory to spread the culture of the open data and offer tools for its reuse (infographics,
maps, visualizations). Actually, we have here 13 stories and more than 140 followers, but Storify itself is going towards a closure of the platform.

Istat does not have an Institutional page on Facebook. We opted for a spot presence for particular events or editorial products (Annual Report on the Country situation in 2009, first World Statistics Day, Tenth Statistical Conference). In December 2010 a fan page was opened - which registered about 7,500 like - for the 6th General Census of Agriculture, mainly to create a virtual space where the survey community was able to meet for comparisons.

Linkedin: this channel was opened and used in recent years by Istat researchers to share contents. Since last 8th May it passed under the management of the social media team within the Communication Department and in only two weeks the increase in followers of the account has been 13%. This channel is entirely populated by professionals and therefore it allows in a more immediate way to establish contacts with specific targets, for example people interested in economic, social and demographic items. Currently, our Linkedin account has almost 7,800 followers. We discovered through the platform that more than half of Istat employees have a Linkedin profile (about 1,220 people); this means more than a thousand people who can potentially viralize the contents of our channel. Furthermore, all the employees could become fully active in sharing institutional posts.

At the moment, we are considering to open an account also on Telegram and WhatsApp.

6. A special Istat case history described through our social channels

On the occasion of the third edition of the Statistics Festival, held every year in Treviso, we created a dedicated communication plan.

With specific regard to its communication via social, this is what was planned:

**Twitter**

- construction of an editorial plan
- choice of the hashtags (#StatisticAll, #trevisofestival)
- identification of the subjects to be tagged in each tweet to stimulate the action go viral
- live twitting of the highlights of the various events scheduled during the Festival in the section organized by Istat (that it was ‘StatisticAll Young’, a project including workshops and games dedicated to children and young people, multimedia activities and entertainment initiatives for an audience of all ages)
- delivery of contents already published on other social networks (excluding Instagram)
- realization of a ‘Moment’ on Twitter at the end of the Festival
  https://twitter.com/i/moments/914848941862277123

**Instagram**

- construction of an editorial plan
- choice of the hashtags (#StatisticAll, #trevisofestival)
• live blogging of the event with photo and video shot in presence
  https://www.instagram.com/p/BZdhvozFRyS/?taken-by=istat_it

**YouTube**

• overall video of the event https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9qYnzm2p_I
  (at the end of the Festival)

**SlideShare**

• eventual slides of our President

**Flickr**

• photo gallery at the end of the event
  https://www.flickr.com/photos/galleria_istat/albums/72157687822602883

During the days of the event the live twitting was so successful that our hashtag #StatisticAll became trending topic of the day. **Some key figures:** in the days of the Festival a total of 27 tweets were made (most of them live). The most popular among these received respectively 7,798 – 6,025 – 4,110 and 3,118 views. They registered an average of total interactions equal to 160 each. On Instagram, we did 16 post (most of them live) and the most popular among these were those live telling special moments of the Festival through video clip (about 130 views each one)

### 7. Conclusions

At the beginning, social media were used as a simple extension of the Istat online presence or as a vehicle to take users to visit our website. Only at a later time they moved on to increasingly exploit their interactivity with citizens, so activating listening, involvement and engagement.

In a framework such as social media it is important to work in a view of **continuous improvement**. Therefore, we introduced in our communication strategy a ‘social media system’. A network of channels that can be adapted to the different set goals and that are at the same time part of a multiplicity of tools aimed at communicating in a coordinated and univocal way, even with other tools less interactive. Above all, this means implementing a careful monitoring of our **e-reputation** in order to strengthen and keep intact the consideration of our **brand identity** while implementing our ability to dialogue with all our users.

The comparison with other Italian and international realities is also very important. This allows us to learn from ours and others’ mistakes, always in a view of continuous improvement. It also helps us to go at the same speed with other web communication professionals in an area of constant innovation by definition. In order to evolve it is indeed fundamental to gain knowledges from other realities, especially those whose main activity is similar to ours as other public bodies, specifically NSIs.
The change in perspective that now it must be done is starting from this awareness to realize a real network of communication experts who work in similar situations as we are. This is certainly the best way to become stronger, to succeed each of us to make strategic the function of communication within our own single Institute. The remaining important step to develop in the short future is to strengthen the team dedicated to social media activity in terms of specific professional skills. In fact, the current team has been constituted by selecting among the various communication experts already in staff those who showed for personal attitude a greater sensitivity with respect to the topic. Of course, investments have been made on their specific training, but the next goal is to better adapt the structural asset of the function in compliance with the Communications policies that our Institute carries out.

Our forthcoming challenges are the XIII Italian National conference of statistics (4-6 July 2018, in Rome) and the Permanent censuses (Population and housing, Enterprises, Public Institutions and Non-profit Institutions).

key words: web, social network, information, communication, innovation, social platform, new media.

‘DO THE EVOLUTION’