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**EVALUATION OF THE USER GROUPS OF STATISTICAL INFORMATION AND
THE EFFICIENCY OF ITS DISSEMINATION BY MASS MEDIA**

Paper prepared by Alexander Nikolov, Director of Statistical Publishing and Printing House,
National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria

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The Bulgarian experience in democratic dissemination of statistical information during the last seven years shows some crucial differences between the situation in East-European countries and the West: while the western statistical offices try to anticipate the information needs and interests of their clients, the public at the East suffers from a kind of "information crisis".

At a first glance such concepts as "the seduction of gatekeepers" (Canada) and "locked up briefings" (England and USA) are based on different dissemination approaches. But in fact their deep nature is one and the same: they aim after all to stimulate the public interest in statistical information in a society which is information-bored. This fact determines the enduring efforts of statisticians, public-relation experts and press officers in the countries with developed democracies (and stable economies) to offer more attractive statistical products and more and more statistical services.

The Bulgarian social climate of continuous distress is marked by an increased social need for information on the 'sick' problems such as the inflation, unemployment, incomes of the population etc. This facilitates the statisticians' task as people themselves are interested in our results.

On the other hand, the social reality changes very fast. New phenomena and new social groups appeared, which need special attention from those who produce statistical information and who disseminate it. It means that the politics of simple retranslation of statistical information from its producers to its users will be less and less efficient. A new more active approach is needed, including, on the one hand, marketing research of the important user groups of statistical products and services, and on the other hand, evaluation of the efficiency of the media as most important agents and mediators in this process.

Two recent studies carried out by a research team headed by the author, try to provide the necessary information on both aspects.

The empirical research "Present and Potential Users of Statistical information" was carried out in mid 1996 among 1000 private and state companies, distributed proportionally to the density of the country. The sample was constructed of people determined as a perspective social group from the view point of their interests to statistical data. This explains the fact that the respondents were mainly persons with higher education (68.1%), in their most active age (58.8% between 36 and 50 years old), working predominantly in the management, finances and accounts, and economic sphere: 36.2% are accountants, 23.0% - economists, 15.6% - persons with managing and entrepreneurial functions (managers, presidents and directors of companies, etc.)

The most important conclusions of the study were:

1. As a whole, the social climate for dissemination of statistical information is very favourable: 77.9% of the respondents are interested in the information and only 9.4% do not trust it. The major part of the respondents use statistical data in their work, although only 32.2% use the data regularly. 13.7% never use statistical data in their work.
2. The National Statistical Institute and the regional statistical bureaus were appointed as the leaders in the dissemination process (for 57.6% of the respondents),

followed by the press (for 54.4%), the TV (for 29%), and some state administrations (for 12%). The supposed competitive private agencies and consultant companies are used as a source of statistical data by only 1.6% of the respondents.

The results of the study confirm that in spite of the positive changes since the beginning of the 1990s-towards opening of the information flow to broader social layers, NSI still plays a rather passive role mainly as a source of information, but not as an active disseminating agent.

This conclusion is confirmed by a content analysis of the publications in the press containing statistical information or devoted to problems, concerning official statistics in Bulgaria. Some 977 publications were analyzed during a one-year period (December 1995 - November 1996) and included the most popular daily and weekly as well as neutral or party newspapers. The publications were classified by the following criteria: thematic range; authorship; data argumentation; precision of citing; attitude to NSI or to persons, working for NSI; level of statistical information. As a result of the totalitarian past, it can be concluded that the image of official statistics in the press is still negative and considered as "artificial statistics". Negative prejudices still exist as to the objectivity of the results and impartiality of the NSI as state institution, but it would not be correct to interpret this as evidence of the weakness of the NSI, but rather as evidence of some journalistic weakness.

Most of the publications contained brief information (38.9%) on the inflation, the observed commodities, the GNP etc., without any analysis or comments. Only 10.6% of all publications contain deeper interpretation of the offered data, including analysis, tendencies and prognosis. The material has been written mainly by journalists (48.7%) or editorials (41.2%) and only in 4.3% statisticians were asked for comment. The statistical data are published mainly at a national level (92%), some of the weekly newspapers include international comparative data as well ("Cash" - 9%, "Economic Life" - 6%, "Capital" and "168 Hours" - 5%).

The basic themes, that have been discussed in these publications, are pitifully connected rather with the current situation (inflation, current business and observed commodities - 86.3%), and only in 8.3% of the publications more basic macro-economic indicators are treated. The lack of more fundamental statistical analysis on the situation in the country means that there still is no proper understanding (on the side of medias and the general public) in the potential power of statistics, but it can be overcome with the more active role of the statisticians themselves.

The expressed attitude toward the NSI or some NSI's officials is mostly neutral (71%), or simply there is no expressed attitude (5.9%). But 15.5% of the publications are dominated by critical, ironical or a negative attitude to NSI and its objectivity, what is twice more than the expressed positive evaluations (7.1%). Only 4.8% of the publications treat the institution of the official statistics as entirely independent.

There are even some cartoons published in the newspapers treating ironically the statistical institute. "Who can decrease the national criminality?" - asks a popular character in the newspaper "24 Hours". "The National Statistical Institute" - is the answer. Of course, if we accept that the lack of popularity is the worst popularity, then we can probably accept, that even negative popularity is better than no popularity at all.

But the serious problem here is necessity to cultivate the journalists and generally the public opinion in order to become more understanding and cooperative. The lack of confidence into the institution of official statistics is rather an indirect indicator of the journalists' insufficient

knowledge of statistics and their incapability to understand the nature of the process. On the other hand, it shows that there is a lot of work to be done by the statisticians and disseminators themselves.
