

**TRAINING IN MEDIA RELATIONS:
PRACTICES IN SELECTED NATIONAL STATISTICAL AGENCIES**

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I. Introduction

1. National statistical agencies are professional organizations engaged in developing and making widely accessible objective, quality information that serves all sectors of society. They have a responsibility to respondents and clients. But in the end, their audience is the general public, and the news media are the best and most powerful tool for reaching this audience.
2. If the media are to do an effective job in communicating statistics to a general audience, it is imperative that statistical agencies provide them with information that is significant, understandable and relevant. It is also important that agencies respond promptly to media requests for interviews, providing journalists with not only data, but also with meaningful analysis on how these data shed light on current issues in the public domain.
3. An agency's best efforts to provide accurate, timely and relevant analysis can be jeopardized if the message C written or verbal C is not presented in a clear, concise, simple manner. Its efforts can also be jeopardized if analysts are not properly prepared to handle queries from the media, or if journalists cannot readily obtain clarifications or additional information on any given release of data or related issues.
4. This paper will describe a variety of training programs and their main components developed by the national statistical agencies of Canada and the Netherlands, and several federal statistical agencies in the United States to help spokespersons, statistical analysts and others in their dealings with either broadcast or print journalists.

II Why training in media relations

5. National statistical agencies have a common goal in disseminating data: To improve the amount and accuracy of media coverage of the agency's information releases. To achieve this, agencies must strengthen their partnership with the media, who are the gatekeepers between the statistical agency and the public, and who consequently exert a powerful influence on how the public receives its information. In addition, policy makers may often rely on the media for a quick assessment of public opinion and awareness, and use them to track trends in major public issues.

6. Agencies can help their own cause by being accessible and equitable to the media, and by understanding the needs of the media, the way journalists operate, the techniques they use and the limitations they face.

7. The aim of media relations training programs in statistical agencies is to heighten awareness of the journalistic world among statisticians, economists, demographers, sociologists, scientists and other analysts. Such programs can also help them develop materials suitable for the media, and prepare them in terms of attitude, knowledge and ability to deal with the media.

8. In the statistical agencies of Canada, the Netherlands and the United States, training in media relations is usually an integral and central component of the communications or public affairs program. Though not all agencies have as such an on-going formal training program, most appear to have at least an advisory function serving the same goals.

9. Training courses are also an excellent venue for explaining to staff the importance of media relations programs and policies, clarifying roles and responsibilities and promoting various media relations' services. They are also an effective means of establishing and maintaining good collaborative relationships between communications and subject-matter staff.

III Requirements for media training

10. Establishing and conducting a successful media-training program requires certain levels of policy and resource support within the statistical agency. While programs may vary in their extent, scope, approach, and procedures, all have certain basic requirements.

11. First, it is necessary that the agency's senior executive and other senior managers support and value media training. Management must convey its awareness of the need to develop and improve skills in working with the media. Statisticians, analysts and others who will be trained must have a full appreciation of the benefits of training, and must want to improve their media relations skills.

12. Public affairs and communications officers can foster this environment by promoting the benefits of media training. But, most effectively, it can be done by word of mouth, that is, recommendations from other subject-matter experts who have benefited from training, or who have previously run into trouble because they lacked advance planning and training.

13. Trainers can be in-house communications staff or consultants hired under contract. However, any outside trainers should have an intimate knowledge of the particular mission, as well as the agency's policies, to tailor the training program to the needs of both subject matter people and the media relations program. Communications officers might supplement resources by assembling panels of experts, inviting guest speakers, or collaborating with other agencies to share trainers.

14. Physical resources, such as a closed-circuit television studio, can be important to an effective training program, notably when preparing for media interviews. Mock interviews should be as close as possible to the real thing. Studio settings add to realism and help staff prepare for the actual interview. However, the process should not grind to a halt for want of a particular piece of equipment, or because an appropriate facility cannot be booked.

15. Finally, a training program should effectively communicate the agency's media policies, adding weight to the agency's mission and objectives in media relations.

IV Types of media relations training programs

4.1 Writing for the media

16. The first contact with the media is often through a written message C a press release, an analytical publication or a technical report. Right away, there are pitfalls to overcome. Authors of these publications rarely meet face-to-face with journalists to help them interpret messages.

17. At the same time, few journalists have the knowledge or expertise to extract the most important elements from an analytical article, or to adapt the text for a general audience, without the risk of altering the message. In addition, journalists usually work against the clock to tight deadlines. They lack the time, and in many cases the training, to analyze raw information.

18. It is, therefore, essential that statistical agencies pay special attention to any text destined for the media. They must communicate clearly in simple language if they want their information echoed accurately and positively to the general public. In fact, some key messages should be written so clearly that they could be read verbatim on radio or television newscasts. If news releases are too technical or too long, they might not be covered at all. Even worse, agencies run the risk of having their data misinterpreted, or covered erroneously.

19. In general, training courses on writing for the media in the three countries are designed to expose agency staff to the constraints involved in preparing news releases and other materials destined for the media, as well as to share writing tips and techniques. Ideally, the individuals who provide this training will themselves have received training on how to train.

Topics covered in writing for the media courses:

20. Statistical agencies generally inform the media through news releases about the context, trends and relationships behind their numbers. With this in mind, courses on writing for the media usually concentrate on:

- Policies, guidelines and tips concerning media relations.
- Understanding the media and how to strengthen our partnership with them.
- Doing analysis: analytical approaches to extracting newsworthy and relevant information from new data sets; how to identify important contextual information that should be presented in releases.
- Writing in a journalistic style, in a clear, concise and simple fashion, and developing strong story lines, leads and subheads; and,
- Presenting tables, charts and graphs effectively.

21. Courses usually include hands-on exercises for participants. At Statistics Canada and Statistics Netherlands, for example, course participants prepare and critique a press release in class. Structured training sessions that are held periodically range from half-day seminars to two-day courses, with follow-

up sessions as needed. In Canada and the United States, shorter sessions of one or two hours are also offered as segments of regular subject-matter training courses.

22. Moreover, communications or public affairs officers offer assistance to data specialists in preparing materials aimed at the media, including writing advice. In conjunction with a local training institute, the Press Office at Statistics Netherlands gives courses on how to write press releases, which is also part of a more general course on writing for the general public. The course pays special attention to writing long articles in a user-friendly fashion. The Press Office has published guidelines and a checklist on writing press releases which statisticians can consult as needed.

23. At Statistics Canada, the Policy on spokespersons and media relations requires subject matter people to prepare materials or events destined for the media in close co-operation with the agency's communications officers to ensure consistency of message, and to safeguard the agency's image and integrity.

24. Statistics Canada's first line of communication with the media is The Daily, its official release bulletin. The agency's policy requires data to be announced in The Daily before they are disseminated further. Consequently, The Daily was the ideal vehicle to improve communication with the public through the media.

25. A formal two-day training course called A Writing Effective Releases for The Daily has been in operation at Statistics Canada since 1994. The course was developed around guidelines for writing news releases prepared by a group of senior managers under the chairmanship of the Chief Statistician of Canada. This Senior Editorial Review Board critically reviewed all major news releases in The Daily over a period of 22 years. In essence, these guidelines stress two factors: writing news releases in a journalistic style, and expanding analysis to show the importance, relevance and context of new information.

26. At its outset, the course was offered monthly, on a division-by-division basis. It was targeted at all analysts writing for The Daily. Managers responsible for approving releases for publication were asked to attend with their staff. This request was made because some analysts complained that their managers were reluctant to approve releases written under the new change in culture desired by the Senior Editorial Board. Analysts in most subject-matter divisions have taken the course. Consequently, the frequency of the course has dropped to about four times a year.

27. The course offers structured training on site for up to 12 people at a time. During the first day, analysts participate in workshops on writing journalistic style and analyzing data. On the second day, as mentioned earlier, they participate in a hands-on exercise, preparing and critiquing their own news release in class. Courses are tailored to meet the particular needs of a given subject matter division.

28. The credibility of the trainer is crucial. At Statistics Canada, it was proven extremely effective to hire an experienced journalist to deliver the training program, as well as to provide advice on writing for the news media.

29. American statistical agencies use a number of approaches. At the U.S. Department of Energy, analysts have a checklist to help prepare news releases, encourage them to determine the most important information to convey, and to help identify specific audiences. The checklist describes how to fashion a lead paragraph, and cautions about providing too much detail and relying on jargon. The emphasis is on language for the lay person, and on expressing the information in a relevant, meaningful way for the average citizen.

30. At the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, the public affairs office prepares most of the press material. However, analysts are asked to identify what is known as the SOCHO (Single Overriding Communication Health Objective) 3/4 the main facts to be communicated 3/4 to help shape and direct the material. The author often prepares a SOCHO page, which identifies the major messages, audiences and final take-home message. This exercise also helps the analyst prepare for later interviews by focusing on the most important facts in an array of information.

4.2 *Encountering the media*

31. To meet their objective of informing the public, statistical agencies rely heavily on the media to reach those segments of the public who would not otherwise know about their figures, products and services. Every media encounter is an opportunity to inform the public. A 10-minute interview can sometimes become a one-time opportunity to convey an important message to the public.

32. The difficulty for analysts, particularly in a radio or television interview, is that they have no way of knowing exactly what portion might be aired. Radio and television journalists often require only a 10-second "sound byte", and discard the rest of the interview. Consequently, analysts must know how to use the time at their disposal to get their message across clearly, concisely and effectively.

33. As a footnote, it goes without saying that statistical agency staff should be professional, objective and effective at all times in their dealings with the media.

4.2.1 *General media training*

34. In most agencies, experienced media relations officers deliver hands-on structured courses on a regular basis to help statistical agency staff acquire the skills to deal effectively with the media. This periodic, structured training usually lasts for one or two days. Courses include interview taping and critiquing exercises for participants, during which they learn to feel comfortable in front of microphones and cameras.

35. Topics covered in encountering the media courses:

- Policies, guidelines and tips concerning media relations.
- Mastering the media interview (print, open-line, live and taped television or radio interviews):
 - how to prepare for a media interview by targeting the audience and structuring the answers;
 - how to effectively communicate messages and remain in control of the interview, and;
 - how to answer different types of questions (including difficult and hostile ones).

36. Statistical agencies use this training to instill confidence in their staff, help them keep control in interviews, and hopefully avoid situations in which inexperienced analysts are stampeded into erroneous, inappropriate or ill-advised comments. Training should demonstrate the importance of planning and structuring responses, rather than just reacting to journalists' questions. As a result, participants hopefully can transform media interviews into opportunities to deliver clear and concise messages confidently.

37. Statistics Canada has made this type of media relations training mandatory for any employee who deals occasionally with journalists. Under its Policy on spokespersons and media relations, program directors must ensure that spokespersons¹ and data contacts² have or obtain the necessary training to do media interviews. After a number of unfortunate incidents involving analysts and the media, the AEncountering the Media course was made mandatory in April 1997 for all of Statistics Canada's 160

data contacts of major releases. Since that decision, more than half has taken the course; the rest are scheduled to take it before the end of March 1999.

38. This course, led by a Statistics Canada instructor, has been designed as a comprehensive media training program. It consists of a combination of lectures, videos, slides, planning exercises and role-played media situations, including simulated interviews in a studio environment.

39. Analysts are asked to complete a pre-course questionnaire to identify issues and lines of questioning. This enables the instructors to link the training to the participant's experiences, abilities and goals. The information also helps them prepare a line of questioning tailored to each participant for use during individual simulated interviews. Participants get a manual, as well as a pocket tip booklet, which is a handy reference tool summarizing key tips for on-the-job use. Most of the teaching materials were developed by a private consulting communications firm and customized to suit Statistics Canada's requirements.

40. A refresher session is now also part of the agency mandatory training program. The refresher consists of a one-day summary version of the two-day AEncountering the Media course. It is intended for those who have not received training in more than two years, or those who have not regularly given media interviews since they were last trained.

41. To help statisticians unfamiliar with media relations, the Press Office at Statistics Netherlands has prepared a document identifying pitfalls around communications with the media. The Press Office has also developed guidelines for press contacts, which mainly outline rules for analysts, as well as their rights and responsibilities in their dealings with broadcast and print media. The guidelines cover preparing the interview with a communications specialist, and trying to forecast how the interview will be conducted and which questions will probably be asked.

42. Statistics Netherlands also arranges for its trained spokespersons to meet twice a year to learn from each other's experiences and to discuss special topics, such as the policy on embargoes. During these meetings, the agency's spokesperson for the economy gives a talk on the state of the economy so that all spokespersons can present economic figures in the proper context.

43. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis runs regular training, which is an annual requirement for all analysts who work with the press. The Bureau also has a set of guidelines, which provide guidance on policy as well as tips for dealing with the press. The public affairs chief conducts mock interviews with the statisticians involved in each release so that they can benefit from each other's answers.

44. The U.S. National Center for Health Statistics provides a general overview for all staff. This training provides all professional staff members with an understanding of the media. Individuals who are likely to do frequent media interviews attend a longer one-day training session. This training provides opportunities to practice the various types of on-camera interviews. The National Center for Health Statistics has developed a booklet to help staff prepare for potential interviews with all forms of news media. The guide includes checklists for preparing for interviews and controlling messages during interviews. A longer document outlines good practices before, during and after an interview.

45. Based on feedback from participants, it appears, first, that nearly all of them learn skills that can be used on the job, and secondly, that the courses meet their expectations. Often this is a case simply of improving their comfort level when dealing with the media.

4.2.2 *Ad hoc media training*

46. Statistical agencies also offer advice and tailored courses to meet particular needs. Tailored courses designed to help analysts prepare for the release of their data are a common practice, especially when publishing major releases or reports that are likely to draw media attention.

47. When time permits, these courses are two-fold exercises. Media relations officers first meet with analysts to determine potential issues and establish the appropriate communications strategy. Advice is also offered on how to prepare positioning statements and key messages, and how to deflect difficult questions.

48. This training session is followed a few days later by a taped mock interview, during which analysts get an opportunity to deliver their messages. The interviews are reviewed and critiqued, sometimes in a group setting, to fine-tune the delivery. If time is a constraint, training is limited to the simulated interview and lasts only one to two hours.

49. Such sessions are particularly effective when there is time to brainstorm about the type of questions reporters will have and the focus of media coverage, and help prepare analysts for interviews. Analysts too often concentrate on the data alone, or the content of their report. They have to be reminded that their data are not being released in a vacuum, and that the media will cover their story in relation to other issues, news and events. Reviewing the public environment for the analysts and broadening their view from their particular study to the "real world" is an important aspect of media training.

50. Advice on how to deal with the media is also always available to subject-matter analysts. For example, media relations officers at Statistics Canada monitor media coverage resulting from interviews or public appearances by other agency staff to permit rapid response to misleading or erroneous reporting. Media relations officers meet routinely with interviewees to discuss their performance during their last media interview.

51. Ad hoc media training is perhaps the easiest to evaluate. There is almost immediate feedback on the extent and effectiveness of coverage. At the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, as at Statistics Canada, media relations officers meet program staff to review the taped or print coverage with the aim of improving skills in media interviews, and improving media materials and training. Public affairs and program staff see the situation as one in which they learn from each other.

V Conclusion

52. Statistical agencies rely heavily on the news media to disseminate data and other program information effectively to a broad and diverse audience. Through a variety of media relations training programs, statistical agencies are generally able to provide designated staff with the necessary training to face the media, and develop and deliver messages in a clear, concise, consistent and accountable manner.

53. The purpose of this paper was to outline training programs developed by selected statistical agencies to help spokespersons, statistical analysts and others in their relations with the media. There are certainly other approaches and experiences that should be considered. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate a discussion of this important topic.

54. In summary, based on practices presented in this paper, the mix and nature of media relations training programs at selected statistical agencies are similar, despite differences in organizational structure and culture. The best media training programs:

- have a carefully designed and developed strategy which matches program mission to communications goals;
- have the support of top management and the willing participation of subject-matter staff;
- focus on developing and managing the message, and encourage staff to view media interviews as an opportunity to communicate in an effective manner;
- are dynamic, with capacity to adapt as media and program requirements change;
- are flexible enough to meet the needs of the specific program staff involved, while general enough to maintain agency goals and standards;
- are active, and given priority and importance throughout the agency, and finally;
- are evaluated both by communications and program staff, and are modified and improved with input from staff, the media and peers.

¹ Spokespersons are persons designated by the Chief Statistician of Canada to respond to media inquiries on cross-cutting issues that might arise concerning the agency's operations, programs and policies.

² Data contacts are professional staff named in Statistics Canada's Daily or designated by senior managers to provide the day-to-day explanation and interpretation of data.