

## **National Statistical Offices and Administrations, and the Web: a Survey**

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### **Keywords**

Websites, National Statistics Institutes, Qualitative Survey, good practice

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a qualitative survey of the Websites of the National Statistics Institutes throughout the world. On the basis of this, recommendations for a definitive set of pages are presented, and references (URLs) for numerous examples are given.

### **Background**

1. In 1996, I wrote a paper which looked at issues for the dissemination of statistical data on the Internet [LAMB96]. As part of the paper, I did a very small survey of only four sites, looking at what National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) were publishing on the Web. Although the survey was small, the diversity of styles and services offered made me think that it would be worth while repeating the exercise in more detail. In that original survey, I identified seventeen different services and facilities, only two of which were offered by all four sites. This made a case for thinking that NSIs would benefit from considering what other sites were offering.

### **Methodology**

2. My experience in the last survey showed that it was not possible to keep track of the links one pursued unless it was done in a systematic way. I therefore used an Excel spreadsheet to record my activities as I explored each site. I started nearest home, with the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) home page, noting all links from that page, and copying and pasting the URLs into the spreadsheet.

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I followed most of the links, making notes as I went. Finally I followed the link to other statistical offices, selected one of these, and repeated the process.

### **Facts and Figures**

3. In all I found sixty-four references to NSIs or International Agencies. In 1997, forty-seven of these checked out successfully; since then a few of these have become inaccessible. I examined 13 in some depth, using the methodology above. The rest were browsed in a less systematic way, looking for interesting features and examples. There were 6 absolute failures, although in a few cases some NSIs had out of date links which others had identified correctly.

### **Some conclusions**

4. In my search I found a variety of styles. Very few could be said to be bad, although I have my own preferences. I found it impossible to predict which sites would be impressive or otherwise. There were some very good examples in unexpected places. As I looked round the sites, I found my ideas of what was preferable crystallising. The diversity of styles and presentations made me decide that, rather than present a list of features and measure the number of sites which conformed, I would try to describe my ideal site, and give references to examples where I could. Most sites could find some ideas from other sites which would improve their own.

### **Some considerations for a NSI Site**

5. I would first like to summarise the main features and considerations that contribute to my ideal site. Then I will present outlines of the pages I consider essential for a good statistical office website. The considerations come under a number of headings, and much of what I will say is applicable to any publication on the Web.

- ◆ *Style:* Change of style should indicate major change in emphasis. For example, a transfer to another site will result in a change of style. Different styles within the same organisation can be confusing. Differences within the organisation, for example between departments, should be transparent to the user. Most styles are acceptable so long as they are consistent. The style should add interest to the site without being 'busy' and distracting.
- ◆ *User friendliness:* Considerations for the users are obviously at the heart of any well designed web page. Large graphics are tempting, but can slow the response time, so users should be aware of the potential slowness before they enter the page. If the graphics are important to them, they will be prepared to wait. On the other hand, text only pages can be boring, and the judicious use of small icons make things interesting.
- ◆ *The introduction:* The basic information the user needs for assessing and navigating the site should be on the first page. There should be clear indications of language used.
- ◆ *Consistency:* Consistency of style has already been mentioned. There should also be a consistency in the way links can be followed. There should never be more than one version of a document available to the user. Documents should be of a uniformly high standard of presentation.
- ◆ *Legibility:* When the user has navigated to the information he requires, there are a number of ways in which he can access it, and he should be able to choose. The document should have a font large enough for him to read it on screen. It should also be easy to print. If graphics are a part of the substance of the page, and not just decorative, they should be printable. Adobe Acrobat or other

readers are useful for large documents, but can be slow. Ideally the user would have a choice of methods for viewing.

- ◆ *Copyright:* The user will print these pages and use these graphics. It is important that the source of the data is acknowledged. Therefore the user should be asked to make these acknowledgements, and tables, charts and documents that may be reproduced should themselves include copyright and references.
- ◆ *Feedback:* It is important to ask for feedback, giving relevant e-mail addresses for the different kinds of feedback that may occur. These include technical access and linkage problems, comments on the content, and queries about the service.

### **My ideal NSI site**

6. The next few examples outlining my ideal pages are necessarily a personal preference. The pages of any NSI will reflect the corporate policy and outlook of the organisation. Some will focus mostly on users from their home country, others are international in outlook. One site, for example, linked directly to the National Tourist Office of the country. There may be a selection of languages, and this is the aspect I deal with first.

7. There are two ways of approaching the question of language: The home page can be 'linguistically neutral', offering a selection of languages. In this case, the name of the Institution should be given in all the languages offered. It is a good idea to avoid associating a language with a country, such as using a Union Jack to represent English.

8. An alternative strategy is to have the home page in one language, probably the native language, with options to switch to mirror home pages in different languages. The decision will be partly political, for example, if it is important that the NSI is not associated with a particular language. It may also be practical, if several languages are on offer.

9. Having dealt with the question of language, I will discuss what I would like to see in the main English language home page, which would of course be reflected in the other languages. The main features should be gathered together in seven main headings, with buttons or icons and brief explanations of the links to other pages. These main headings are:

- ◆ *Welcome:* about; how to; new users; what you'll find.
- ◆ *News:* press releases; events; new to the site.
- ◆ *Publications:* with search engine.
- ◆ *Online public services:* freely available tables and data.
- ◆ *Subscription services:* what's on offer and what it costs.
- ◆ *Issues:* Policy decisions; new designs; new surveys; articles; methodology.
- ◆ *Links:* to other relevant national and international agencies.
- ◆ *Copyright:* ideally linking to a page spelling out the copyright conditions.

- ◆ Responsibility: *an e-mail address for the administrator of the web pages.*
- ◆ *Last updated:* date of last update

10. Now the main pages are presented in more detail. The URLs of some example home pages are given in Table 1. These illustrate different styles, and are not necessarily recommendations.

Table 1

Site	URL
Australian Bureau of Statistics home page	<a href="http://www.abs.gov.au/">http://www.abs.gov.au/</a>
Czech Statistical Office	<a href="http://infox.eunet.cz/csu/csu_e.html">http://infox.eunet.cz/csu/csu_e.html</a>
Lithuanian Department of Statistics	<a href="http://www.std.lt/">http://www.std.lt/</a>
Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics	<a href="http://www.pcbs.org/">http://www.pcbs.org/</a>
South African Statistical Office	<a href="http://www.css.gov.za/">http://www.css.gov.za/</a>

### The Welcome page

11. This is intended for new users. It contains static information about the NSI and information that allows the user to find his way around the site, under headings such as

- About Us
  - ⇒ Mission Statement etc.
  - ⇒ Purpose of Web Site
  - ⇒ Organisational chart
  - ⇒ Addresses and contact numbers
- Table of Contents
- New Users
  - ⇒ Help
  - ⇒ Hints
  - ⇒ Finding your way around

12. As well as the Mission statement, the legal basis of the Institute, messages from senior officials and frequently asked questions could be included. For examples, see the frequently asked questions page of Statistics Netherlands ([www.cbs.nl/eng/faqs/index.htm](http://www.cbs.nl/eng/faqs/index.htm).) and the Table of Contents page from Statistics Sweden ([www.scb.se/scbeng/conteng.htm](http://www.scb.se/scbeng/conteng.htm)).

### The News Page

13. This page contains the dynamic information, and content includes substantive information such as press releases and other topical information:

- Up to the minute information
  - ⇒ Press Releases
  - ⇒ Hot news
  - ⇒ Schedule of events
  - ⇒ New to the site

- Date of last update

14. It also contains schedules of events such as the release of new data, and information about the development of the site. Some of this information may also appear on the home page, but should not obscure the other information there, and should also be referenced in this page.

### **The Publications Page**

- Paper publications
  - ⇒ with search engine
  - ⇒ sorted by category
  - ⇒ reference, cost and contact details on each page
  - ⇒ direct link to on-line ordering
- Electronic publications
- CD-roms and diskettes (with similar information)
- Price list (with language)

15. Paper publications and electronic publications should be separated, although the same kind of information is needed for both. This information includes categories of publications by topic, and a search engine is needed. The full details of the publication, including ISBN number, internal reference number, cost and contact information should appear beside the abstract or synopsis. A direct link to online ordering should be available. It is not helpful to expect the user to gather together all the details of the publications and re-enter them himself.

16. An example of a publication description from Statistics Canada can be seen at [www.statcan.ca/english/Vlib/Research/ana59.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/Vlib/Research/ana59.htm). Electronic publications include CD-roms and diskettes. The same considerations in presentation apply to electronic publications as to paper publications. A separate price list is also a good idea. An example from Statistics Finland ([www.stat.fi/sf/tp/products.html](http://www.stat.fi/sf/tp/products.html)) also states the language of publication.

### **Online Public Services Page**

- Online published tables
  - ⇒ sorted by category
  - ⇒ with references
- Charts (simple)
- Copyright each
- Free down-loadable files (e.g. documents, data and software)
- Selected demographic information to orient the visitor (with maps and percentages)

17. Tables, like publications, need to be referenced by category, possibly with a search engine. Links back to the published documentation are important, as are copyright and source information. Individual tables can be disorienting, especially for a visitor who is not familiar with the basic demography of the

country, so percentages and links to this basic information are useful. Charts should be simple and tell a single message. Even in hard copy charts can be confusing, so it is important not to make them too complex [BOUND96]. An example can be seen at Statistics Sweden ([www.scb.se/snabb/akueng.htm](http://www.scb.se/snabb/akueng.htm)).

### **The Subscription Services Page**

18. The user needs to know what services the subscription will give him, what the prices are and how he can pay.

- Describe the services
  - ⇒ what is on offer
  - ⇒ price
  - ⇒ method of payment
- Clearly separated from publicly available information

### **Issues Pages**

19. This page or pages should contains a number of very important topics which, on the whole, are not as well addressed as the topics in the earlier pages.

- Methodologies
- Classifications and dictionary
- Research findings
- Information about policy decisions
- New surveys
- Invitations to contribute

20. Methodologies, descriptions of survey etc. are very important for the understanding of the tables and charts. They are even more important if data is available for downloading. There is room for more online publication of standard classifications and similar information. It should be easy for a user to incorporate metadata and descriptions into his final analysis or publication. For example, [www.die.gov.tr/TURKISH/SOZLUK/dataa.html](http://www.die.gov.tr/TURKISH/SOZLUK/dataa.html) ,shows a dictionary entry from SIS Turkey. Several NSIs conduct their own research, and these findings are useful sources of information. As well as the static information about the NSI in the Welcome page, more dynamic information can be given. The UK ONS has a page describing its Statistical Advisory Committee, and the minutes of the committee meetings are available online ([www.emap.co.uk/ons/statadv.htm](http://www.emap.co.uk/ons/statadv.htm)). Another useful feature is information about new or changing surveys. For example, a page from the ONS ([www.emap.co.uk/ons/statadv.htm](http://www.emap.co.uk/ons/statadv.htm)) discusses the 2001 census, and in another ([www.statcan.ca/english/Subjects/Labour/Survey/interf.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/Subjects/Labour/Survey/interf.htm)), Statistics Canada describes its new Labour Force Survey.

### **Links**

21. It was stated earlier that nearly every site has links, and in all I found 64, including international agencies such as OECD and IMF, but excluding other national links. The degree of cover varied greatly.

For example, Spain was a good source for Latin American links. The arrangement of each was different, although a few sites pointed to the links page of other NSIs. This was not always a successful strategy. Maintaining links is obviously hard. I found a few out of date links, not counting those which gave consistent failures. I also found a link to the Centre for European Social Research at the University of Mannheim. This raises the question of whether there is a case for a centralised site.

### **A few more ideas**

22. Finally, I will give a few ideas that I picked up while browsing the sites. First, a comment about linking to other sites. It is a good idea to say in the link what the destination site is. The link will not necessarily point to that other site's home page, so the location may not be clear to the user. Apart from being confusing, it could give the impression that the page belongs to the NSI, and this could spoil the image if the style is unsuitable or less professional. Other ideas encountered were feedback mechanisms in the form of a user survey and a guest book. The count of the number of visitors to the site was popular, and giving the local time of day also gave a feel for the site being visited. Finally I suggest a look at the US Census Bureau's "Just for Fun" pages ([www.census.gov/main/www/fun.html](http://www.census.gov/main/www/fun.html)).

### **Update**

23. This paper was first written for a presentation in April 1997. It will appear in print in July 1998. Given the speed of development on the Web, the paper is doomed to be out of date before it appears. A table of URLs for the countries I found in 1997, has been updated with comments on the situation in 1998 ([www.ed.ac.uk/~jlamb/NSItab.html](http://www.ed.ac.uk/~jlamb/NSItab.html)). Statistical offices should also consider their policy for changes and updating. It is certainly the case that information should be timely, but change for change's sake should be avoided. In particular, static information should remain in the same place, particularly if users are likely to have book-marked it. However a page which says 'current' or 'recent' and gives a date in 1996 should be avoided. I would also like to add as a final example the Australian Bureau of Statistics' page on Copyright regulations, which can be accessed from their home page ([www.abs.gov.au/](http://www.abs.gov.au/)).

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