

Best practices in training in media relations

Paper submitted by Statistics Sweden¹

Summary

One of the most important tasks for the Press Office is to disseminate news releases to the media. The Press Office at Statistics Sweden disseminates about 300 press releases a year. The responsibility for the content in those releases rests with the statisticians. The press releases are not written by the staff at the Press Office but by the statistical experts. Authors in the subject-matter departments deliver their texts to the Press Office by e-mail via the internal computer network on the day before dissemination or, as exceptions, the same day as the dissemination is to be fulfilled.

Therefore the statisticians have to be educated how to write press releases and how to deal with media representatives. The Press Office is responsible for that education, and arranges two kinds of courses for statisticians. They are "How to write successful press releases" and "How to be interviewed".

As an internal facility the Press Office has prepared a guideline in writing press releases to be used by statisticians when presenting their facts and figures.

Statistics Sweden has an interest in journalists to use statistics in their work. Besides education of statisticians writing press releases Statistics Sweden also takes part in education of journalists.

Statistics Sweden has adopted a policy saying that all Official Statistics for which Statistics Sweden is responsible, should be entered into Sweden's Statistical Databases before the year 2000. Researchers and specialised journalists often find the databases useful. Journalists often ask for guidelines to the statistics. Therefore Statistics Sweden gives courses for the journalists "How to find what you are looking for in

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1. Introduction and background

1.1 The Press Office at Statistics Sweden

One of the goals of Statistics Sweden is to improve dissemination and accessibility of the statistics to the mass media and general public. The Press Office is responsible for the dissemination of all news messages to the media. That is an important part of the tasks of the Press Office.

The organisational plan shows that the Press Office is a part of the staff at the Director General's office. The Deputy Director General is the immediate superior of the head of the Press Office. That gives the Press Officers immediate access to the head of Statistics Sweden. There are three Press Officers, two of whom are full-time employees occupied with dissemination and media service and answering journalists' enquiries.

The greatest task is the dissemination of news releases to news agencies and the media. The news value of each bit of information put out is appraised and when "hot" news is to be presented, a press conference is called.

The Press Office also organises seminars and educational visits for internal writers of press releases as well as for journalists.

In addition, the Press Office acts as an advisory service in media matters to all those who have, or plan to have, media contacts.

The Press Office also has the responsibility for media coverage and to compile press cuttings as an internal feedback service.

1.2 The number of press releases

Statistics Sweden disseminates more than 300 press releases a year. Most of them concern economic statistics, short-term indicators:

Consumer Price Index, prices, National Accounts, imports/exports, retail sales, financial market statistics, expectation of own household financial situation over the next 12 months, etc.

As all of these influence the stock market, they are disseminated not only by request of the media but also by request of the actors on the financial and stock markets.

1.3 The receivers of press releases

Besides newspapers and magazines there are other receivers of our press releases. Most important, maybe, are the national and international news agencies, since they are the sources for many more newspapers. They also add complementary information to the figures and are able to make statements and analyses as an objective statistical institute cannot.

Daily newspapers are the largest group of receivers of press releases. Almost all Swedish daily newspapers receive Statistics Sweden's press releases.

The national Swedish radio and television company and all local and regional commercial radio and TV-stations also receive our press releases, even though the commercial radio stations seldom use the figures in their news programs.

Altogether, there are 250 receivers on the dissemination list.

As a matter of curiosity can be mentioned that Statistics Sweden offers subscription of the press releases to anyone interested. The releases are then called "Statistical News" and are disseminated via fax. For the time being there are about 100 subscribers, mostly actors in the financial market depending of quick and reliable statistical information to act and react on.

1.4 Ways of dissemination

1.4.1 Fax

Dissemination of news releases by fax instead of mail, was a revolution some years ago. With fax dissemination all receivers have their message within two hours from dissemination start, even the small newspapers in the countryside. The rate of speed is very important at least for the radio and TV news desks. But new technique has raised better possibilities to disseminate news much faster.

1.4.2 Internet

The primarily reason for Statistics Sweden to join Internet was to present statistics and expose the new databases with better access possibilities. The website has gradually been updated with news releases available not only by journalists but also by the public. Besides the fax the news messages nowadays are released simultaneously at the website. Still many journalists prefer to have the fax sheet of paper automatically to appraise the news value. But more and more journalists are getting accustomed to use the Internet as a toll for news watch.

2. Training of statisticians at Statistics Sweden

2.1 Releases are written by statisticians.

The Press Office's job is to disseminate releases without the strict statistical responsibility for the content. Authors in the subject-matter departments deliver their texts to the Press Office by e-mail via the internal computer network on the day before dissemination or some hours before dissemination time.

The press releases are not written by the staff at the Press Office. Statistics Sweden has chosen another philosophy, another model. Instead, the statisticians, the experts write their own press releases. The releases often are summaries of a report and includes conclusions and analysis that just the experts can compile.

The number of releases disseminated from Statistics Sweden are more than 300 press releases per annum. The great number of releases is another reason why it is totally impossible to have time enough for the Press Office to write all the news releases. A lot of the releases are regularly every month (mostly concerning economic statistics; short term indicators) So there can be one statistician writing 12-15 releases a year. But still with 300 releases there are a lot of different writers, approximate 75-80 persons in Statistics Sweden.

There have been some criticism from journalists that one can notice that the writers are statisticians and experts and that the releases are not so reader-minded for journalists. They use too scientific expressions and the whole sequence of releases are not equivalent concerning disposition, content and level of information.

The Press Office gives advice to all writers in advance how to write successfully. Of course the topics in the releases are not easy to write simply about. CPI, Consumer Price Index, Inflation and so on are complex issues. It's complicated to explain in few lines in an easy way what influence the interest rents has on inflation, especially if you know that all your readers are not educated in economy, and besides that, most of their time they are in a hurry and they should at a single glance at your text immediately would see what the news is.

As a statistician you should have a solid knowledge of a specific topic opposite to a journalist at a news desk, who is to deal with an immensely lot of different topics every day.

2.2. Courses

The Press Office with regularity arranges educational opportunities. Most of them are courses arranged for statisticians and other experts writing press releases. Another course is how to deal with journalists in interview situations. That course also contains exercises in front of TV-cameras.

Teachers are professional journalists working at newspapers or TV-stations.

2.2.1 How to write press-releases

The statisticians have to be familiar with the working conditions for journalists, so they will understand in which environment their press releases end up. A news editors day at the news desk has low similarity to a workday of a statistician.

The main part of these courses is to teach participants how to write in a journalistic way. Besides the rule: "KISS - keep it short and simple" that also means another way of disposition of the material. When writing you have to be selective. It is a common experience that if you do not do the selection of what is the main news, the journalists do, and sometimes they do it statistically wrong. So therefore you have to emphasise what are to be estimated as the main findings. Begin the press release with a summary of the head news.

The course is one day and also contains "write better Swedish", some language training.

As the main teacher there used to be a journalist with whom we have a co-operation. He is not a full time journalist but also a teacher in the Swedish language at high school.

So far 50-60 per cent of the press release writers have participated in this course. Many of the course participants have asked for guidelines for writing press releases. Therefore they are offered that facility, mentioned below.

2.2.2 How to deal with the media representatives and journalists

Few of the statisticians have experience in TV-contribution. It is a rather stressful situation to be in front of the spotlights knowing that the broadcasting can be seen by all your colleagues, neighbours and friends all over the country. The only way to be able to act with self-confidence in front of TV cameras is to practise and practise over and over again.

The Press Office therefore arranges from time to time a course, "How to deal with the media representatives and journalists and how to behave in front of a television-camera". Teachers are a former television journalist and a photographer who now are free-lancers. Most of the participants are heads of departments and employees at the Director Generals office, whose mission there is to represent Statistics Sweden at official occasions. Unfortunately participation so far is voluntarily.

The course is effected during one intensive day in a real TV-studio with spotlights and cameras. The participants come from different agencies and private companies too. That has proved to be a successful mixture of experiences.

2.3 Educational visits

The working conditions for journalists are quite different from those of the statisticians. Normally most of the statisticians have a room of their own. Even when there is a lack of time they usually have several days to compile a report. The news paper editor has to appraise the importance in the content of 300-400 sheets of fax papers a day and decide which ones that have the news value to be adopted for publishing. The news editorial office is a turbulent place to be in. A lot of employees share the desk.

The Press Office therefore arranges educational visits to newspaper offices for statisticians to let them feel the atmosphere and see where their news releases end up. Those meetings have been instructive and to mutual use.

It becomes obvious for the statisticians how very fast the journalists have to estimate the news value of all the releases that flood the editors office. The importance to write short and simple becomes obvious.

2.4 Facilities

Not only the knowledge how media representatives work, but also the legal framework has to be well known among the statisticians dealing with the press. The Press Office has prepared a media policy confirmed by the Director General.

Press release writers have asked for a guideline how to compile news releases. In co-operation with news editors and journalists the Press Office has edited a booklet, called 7 advice from the Press Office when writing news releases. The advice is shown below.

2.4.1 Media policy

The media policy is educationally written "short and simple".

The aim of media contacts is partly to make the statistical information of Statistics Sweden available and known to media, partly to give media an open-minded and distinct information regarding the operations of Statistics Sweden. The scope is attained by keeping a Press Office towards the press at the agency.

The policy also makes it clear who is allowed to represent Statistics Sweden in media and the internal distribution of responsibility. All statistical experts are allowed, and also have responsibility, to have media contacts within their own field of topics. They are the best to answer questions of survey methodology, statistical quality and so on. The journalists will have reliable answers and the statisticians will get useful relations.

2.4.2 Hints and directions from the Press Office

On demand from participants in the writing press release courses a booklet has been delivered to all those who are writing press releases at Statistics Sweden. The title is "7 advice how to write a successful press release". The booklet is prepared in co-operation with a couple of reliable newspaper journalists familiar with statistics, and with whom we have had, and still have, good relations. The booklet gives the following advice:

1. Use headlines rather than headings

An example: Consumer Price Index, February 1997 is a heading. It doesn't tell you anything what has happened with CPI since last month or last year. It's much better to write: CPI increases in February. The journalists then immediately will know what has happened.

2. Begin with a summary

Most news paper stories have a summary, a preamble in the beginning. You can read 5-6 lines and then you know what's the point. A summary in the beginning is very helpful for journalists who are in a hurry. So therefore: Always begin with a summary.

3. Emphasise the main findings

The whole news release is often a summary of an investigation, report or measurement. To help stress on head news. Otherwise there is a risk that they will observe wrong journalists to see what is important you have to lay facts, or focus on some funny details that is not the main point in the news release.

4. Use graphics only for clarification

As employees at a statistical office we are used to read statistics, figures, tables and diagrams. We can interpret the figures and understand what information there is possible to see. We can read connections and so on. For a reader that is not used to deal with statistics all tables and diagrams often are frightening. Be careful when using tables and diagrams.

5. Keep short

If you have seen a newspaper office you know that there is a lot of people shouting, running around, talking with each other and in telephone, all at the same time. The fax machines are permanently producing sheets of papers (at a Swedish newspaper fax there arrives 400 to 500 fax pages a day). It's necessary to keep short when writing- a few pages are enough - otherwise your news release will not have any readers or at least few readers.

6. Follow the basic rules of presentation

They are expressed above. And besides them you have better to:

- avoid technical expressions and statistical professional terms
- explain connections
- write as simple as possible

note who is to be contacted for further information

7 Add a facts box

Explain professional terms in a facts box at the end of the news message. It's an appreciated service.

3. Education of journalists

3.1 Statistical databases

Since January 1, 1997 there are new databases available in Swedish on the Internet from Statistics Sweden. The goals are to enable a higher degree of availability to the statistics and make it easy for the user to download data into his or her own computer.

Statistics Sweden has adopted a policy saying that all Official Statistics for which Statistics Sweden is responsible, should be entered into Sweden's Statistical Databases before the year 2000. It will be done gradually and the databases will be expanded with statistics from other National Statistical Institutes and International Organisations. The following areas of statistics are at present represented in the databases:

Labour, Population, Financial Market, Trade in Goods and Services, Health and Medical Services, Income and Income Distribution, Living Conditions Citizen Influence and voting, National Accounts, Business, Public Finances, Prices and Consumption, Social Services, Transport and Communications, Education and Research. Gradually other areas and topics will be represented.

An English version of the software is released accessible from the English version of web-site. This far no texts concerning the statistics has been translated.

Researchers and specialised journalists often find the databases useful. They can find interesting data and combine. Statistic Sweden arranges database courses several times a year.

3.2 Educational visits at Statistics Sweden

It happens now and then that Statistics Sweden arranges a seminar or an educational visit for journalists at Statistics Sweden. News journalists are invited to participate in a seminar entitled "How to find facts in Swedish statistics", "How to find what you are looking for in statistics", or "Finding answers on questions you have never asked" or topics similar to those.

3.3 Participating editorial meetings

Press officers regularly visit news agencies, newspapers, radio and TV-stations to obtain opinions of how useful the press releases are and so on. Some times a year it happens that a Press Officer are requested to participate in an editorial meeting at a newspaper to give information of Statistics Sweden. It is of a mutual interest to join editorial meetings. The journalists can be better aware of statistics as a source for research of news and interesting descriptions of the society. The news releases of Statistics Sweden will be ranked higher in the journalist's consciousness after such visit.

3.4 Education of journalists at University

Journalists are educated to their profession at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Stockholm and Gothenburg. Most of the courses have an introduction how to use databases. Some years Statistics Sweden has the opportunity to show the students how to use statistics in their future jobs. That kind of educational opportunities are specially designed for students and Statistics Sweden benefits to brief the future journalists how to use statistics.