

HOW TO HANDLE ADVERSE MEDIA COVERAGE

Paper prepared by Mr. Ahmed Aboutaleb, Statistics Netherlands; Mr. Jussi Melkas, Statistics Finland and Mr. Ian G. Scott, Office for National Statistics, UK

Summary

This paper focuses on press handling, but stresses the need for cooperation between business areas within NSIs and those responsible for press relations in dealing with the wider implications. It begins by pointing out that prevention is better than cure, and offers a series of helpful hints. When it comes to damage limitation, the paper spells out a range of possible reactions to a perennial problem. But it offers no firm conclusions, for in dealing with the media no two cases are the same. The paper ends with a series of six case histories, drawn from experience in Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Introduction

1. From time to time every large organisation experiences adverse media coverage. Occasionally such coverage can be described as fair comment, but more often than not it will be ill-informed. Sometimes it will be more or less undeserved, and from time to time it will be without foundation. National statistical institutes (NSIs), with their high public profile, their complex and frequently revised outputs, and their dependence on others for the supply of data, frequently are on the receiving end of this kind of coverage in newspapers, and on radio and television.

Getting alongside the media

2. In general terms, adverse publicity is less likely if the NSI has a good working relationship with the media. How is this achieved?

3. Statistics Finland, for example, has a three-fold policy of making itself useful to the journalists, of trying to get acquainted with them, and of helping them to understand the statistics. The NSI regularly arranges seminars for different groups of journalists - for instance for the news editors from Finland's most popular television channel, and with groups of specialist writers covering subjects such as the environment.
4. The press office at Statistics Netherlands provides a vital link between statisticians and journalists. It translates the journalists' wishes to the organisation, and ensures that the information given in press notices and by spokespersons meets these demands. This means the journalists need not "translate" the statistical information, which helps deal with the often-heard complaint that journalists do not understand the data, or present it wrongly.
5. In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics has clear written guidelines on how to deal with the media. These are aimed mainly at senior staff, but are available to all, statisticians' names and phone numbers appear on press notices and publications and officials can expect to take calls from the media as well as the general public. The golden rule is: always keep the press office in the picture.
6. In any NSI, there is a need for teamwork between those responsible for media relations and officials across the organisation. Clearly, the media-relations specialists need to understand every part of the NSI and keep abreast of developments. But it helps engender a team spirit if statisticians and other officials have some feel for what press relations are all about. In short, the press office needs to devote some time to educating the rest of the office.

Prevention is better than cure

7. Before looking at the most appropriate means of dealing with adverse coverage and limiting the consequential damage, it is as well to stress that prevention is better than cure. This may seem a glimpse of the obvious, but experience tells us that officials with no responsibility for media relations frequently fail to consider the consequences of their actions.
8. At the same time, NSIs publish large volumes of raw data and secondary analysis, with significant potential for things to go wrong from time to time. Then again, however independent the NSI, the world at large (including the media) does not readily distinguish the institution itself from the political process that feeds on the data. And the press likes nothing better than errors on the part of public officials, or a row (or what it perceives as a row) between two parts of the public service.
9. Even so, it is clear that adverse coverage will be less likely if the following guidelines are observed:
 - Take particular care not to publish erroneous data or other information: this may seem obvious, but is worth stating loud and clear
 - Never criticise another part of government or its data
 - Ensure the media-relations section is told of anything that may cause a presentational problem
 - Agree in good time the line to take in publishing new data or information and in fielding questions from the media and the public
 - Make sure everyone - media-relations people and other officials - sticks to the agreed line
 - Modify the line to take as the situation changes

- In dealing with the media take heed of any standard corporate guidance

Damage limitation

10. When adverse coverage is encountered, the following options are available:

- Do nothing - but ensure defensive material is available in case the story generates inquiries from other media outlets. **Advantage:** May well prevent the criticism from being repeated elsewhere, and leaves open the option of responding later if the problem spreads. **Disadvantage:** The reporter may see you as a soft target for the future.
- Talk to the reporter next time he/she is encountered. **Advantage:** Lets him/her know you are monitoring his/her copy so that he/she is likely to take more care in future. **Disadvantage:** The technique won't work if the report is repeated elsewhere.
- Talk to the reporter immediately by phone. **Advantage:** Can put him/her in your debt if you imply you are doing him/her a favour by not taking matters further. **Disadvantage:** Allows the reporter to blame someone else - usually the sub-editor.
- Write to the editor for his/her information. **Advantage:** Potentially can educate both the editor and the reporter. **Disadvantage:** May alienate the reporter and possibly will be ignored.
- Demand that a correction be printed/broadcast. **Advantage:** If a correction is printed/broadcast, this makes it abundantly clear the media outlet got it wrong. **Disadvantage:** Can be very hard to achieve. Newspapers - and electronic media even more - hate to print (or broadcast) a correction, although sometimes they will agree to a "clarification".
- Write a letter to the editor for publication. **Advantage:** If printed as written - which cannot be taken for granted - puts the NSI's response on the public record. **Disadvantage:** Can lead to additional coverage - notably by encouraging readers to write to the letters page.
- Issue a press statement. **Advantage:** Puts your point of view firmly into the public domain. **Disadvantage:** Reporters are likely to sense "a row" and further negative coverage is virtually guaranteed.

11. Clearly, the skill lies in deciding which action is appropriate. One school of thought is to do as little as possible, on the grounds that any reaction will give the matter increased currency. Another approach is always to go in hard, writing a letter for publication every time the NSI is criticised. In general, a press statement will be appropriate only if the NSI is being harassed from all sides.

12. As always, there is a need for teamwork between the business area and those responsible for media relations. This is especially the case when it is decided to write a letter to the editor for publication.

Letters to the editor

13. In writing a letter for publication, some basic rules apply:

- No one should write without consulting those responsible for media relations
- Think about the appropriate level of response; is it worth involving the director of the NSI?
- Respond quickly - on the same day if possible and certainly no later than the next day

- Keep it short - no more than three paragraphs, and two is better
- Find a form of words that pinpoints the offence without repeating the criticism
- Be polite and positive, and never use extreme language
- Unless it is clearly inappropriate, a touch of humour will not go amiss
- Mark the letter: “For publication”
- Send it by fax

Real-life complexities

14. In planning the tactics of damage limitation, it is necessary to judge each case on the individual circumstances - and often they will be complex. This is illustrated by six case histories drawn from experience in Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom during 1997. The case histories follow at Annex A.
15. Whatever happens, even if it is decided to make no formal response, the NSI must not ignore the problem. Sometimes it will be worth trying to find a well-regarded outside expert to analyse the NSI’s work and, hopefully, support its case. And, even when there is no call for such dramatic action, there will be lessons to be learned for next time

Closing the circle

16. Finally, it is worth remarking that a critical story often provides a good opportunity to make a new media contact, for those who criticise an NSI’s operations or outputs are likely to be more interested in statistical matters than the average journalist. Often it is worth taking the time and trouble to introduce them to senior officials and to offer them face-to-face briefing on the subject that interests them. Thus the process of education begins, and hopefully next time the journalist writes about the NSI and its work he or she will be better informed, more objective - and less critical.

ANNEX A

Case history 1: unemployment trends in the Netherlands

Unemployment is very low in the Netherlands and recently - not for the first time - Statistics Netherlands was accused of “depriving the public of a clear view of unemployment”. The drift of an item in *de Volkskrant*, one of the country’s more serious daily newspapers, was that the strong decline in unemployment since 1984 was merely a cosmetic trend, and that the NSI was using statistical tricks to redefine unemployment and present a picture of falling rates. The paper suggested the NSI was confusing the real picture and “creating” an extremely low unemployment rate “out of the league of the

Statistics Netherlands always responds to such allegations, and if necessary uses press office contacts to ensure the reply is published. In this case the director of socio-economic statistics drafted a reply which calmly countered each accusation, explaining that “unemployment” cannot be captured in a single definition, or therefore a single figure. The “unemployed” part of the population comprises all sorts of people - some who want to work, some who don’t, and some who can’t, and Statistics Netherlands publishes a range of figures to present a complete picture of this group. The director’s letter made it clear that the NSI uses different definitions, that all its figures are based on the answers of people interviewed in the national labour force survey, and that it publishes as much information as possible.

It concluded by stating that the government - and not Statistics Netherlands - decides which of the figures is designated as the “official” unemployment rate.

This reaction was published in *de Volkskrant* during the following week.

Case history 2: unemployment figures in Finland

Unemployment data have been a problem in Finland throughout the 1990s, largely because different measures are published by Statistics Finland and the Ministry of Labour. Usually the Ministry finds more people out of work than Statistics Finland.

The problem came to a head when the harmonisation of Statistics Finland’s labour force survey with European practice had some surprising effects on the figures. For example, in May 1997 youth unemployment rose significantly as students looked for summer jobs. Because of the different definitions, this had not happened before.

This caused the Prime Minister to give an interview, during which he accused Statistics Finland of producing unreliable data. This generated 249 stories, and 87 were classified as critical.

Statistics Finland reacted quickly. The Director General appointed an impartial expert group to evaluate the quality of the labour force survey. After a couple of week’s work, the group announced that the survey figures were methodologically correct. It also asked the Ministry of Labour to stop calculating the national unemployment rate and acknowledge Statistics Finland’s figure as a better indicator.

The expert group’s report cooled the tension considerably. But among journalists there is a tendency to think that the higher unemployment figure must be more correct. The report generated 87 press stories, and ten were classified as negative.

The controversy has continued, although on a smaller scale. In an effort to improve the climate, the Ministry of Labour and Statistics Finland now publish a joint release, with a common description of the

labour market and more detailed information. From time to time, the media still makes negative comments, but those involved believe that in the long run the new way of releasing the statistics will lead journalists to a better understanding of the labour market.

Case history 3: General Household Survey suspended in the UK

Following a public consultation, officials of the UK's Office for National Statistics wrote to interested parties to advise them of the suspension for one year of the General Household Survey. They did not consult or even advise the press office, evidently failing to consider the likelihood that one of the recipients would tip off the media.

The press office decided to pre-empt accusations of cover-up or mishandling by feeding the letter to the reporter known to be most interested in the topic, and he subsequently broke the story in the *Guardian*. Coverage elsewhere was inevitable, given an orchestrated public outcry at the suspension of the survey.

A senior ONS official wrote to the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*. Both letters were published, although the *Guardian* modified the text of the letter without consultation.

Case history 4: an unfair accusation in the Netherlands

The January issue of Statistics Netherlands' monthly magazine *Index*, which was devoted to a number of aspects of "time", was reviewed in *Het Parool*, one of the national daily newspapers. Although the review was very favourable, it concluded with the following comment, literally translated from the Dutch:

"Although statistics can lie (about unemployment in the Netherlands, for example), they can also reveal

The senior press officer immediately faxed a letter to the editor of *Het Parool*, under the heading "Statistics Netherlands doesn't lie". He stressed the independent position of the Bureau and the unbiased nature of the figures, pointing out that, because of the complexity of unemployment and the various definitions of the phenomenon, Statistics Netherlands calculates a number of unemployment rates and releases a monthly figure in conformity with the definition agreed by employers' organisations, the trade unions and the Central Commission for Statistics. It also pointed out that a press release published less than two weeks previously had contained a complete range of unemployment figures calculated to a range of definitions.

The letter, which ended by stating that "Statistics Netherlands is not a liar, either in the field of unemployment or in any other field", was published in *Het Parool* the following week.

Case history 5: general government deficit revision in Finland

In February 1997, Statistics Finland published data on the general government deficit as a percentage of GDP. The figure for the previous year was 2.6, which implied that, even in 1996, Finland's public finances were acceptable from the EMU point of view. However, additional work on the statistics showed the deficit figure to be greater. When revised national accounts data were published in July, the deficit percentage was over the EMU criteria line of 3 per cent. Press reporters in Finland failed to spot the problem, but after the *Financial Times* wrote about it the Finnish media woke up to the story.

The February figure was characterised as an error, although the preliminary nature of the data was clearly announced at the time. There were 188 stories in the Finnish press, and 33 criticised Statistics Finland or referred to critical sources.

The press coverage and the international implications led the Ministry of Economic Affairs to ask Statistics Finland to report on the circumstances leading to the change in the data. Of course the media were keenly interested. When the report was handed to the ministry, the deficit made the headlines again. But the ministry concluded that there were no great problems with national accounts methodology in Finland.

The story rumbled on for some time, but there was little criticism when new figures were released in February 1998. For one thing the figures were much improved, and for another the preliminary nature of the data was explained very clearly in the release and at the press conference.

Case history 6: mortality statistics in the United Kingdom

The *British Medical Journal*, writing about mortality statistics published in the ONS quarterly *Population Trends*, accused ONS of acting as a “spin doctor” in writing the accompanying news release.

The accusation was without foundation, because the news release covered a number of topics featured in *Population Trends* and was written in the usual format and style. Furthermore, the mortality statistics were discussed at length during the press conference held to launch the publication - a press conference to which the *British Medical Journal* was invited but chose not to attend.

A senior official ONS wrote to the *British Medical Journal*, which published his letter after a delay of some weeks.

There was no similar coverage in any other publication.