

Work Session on Statistical Output for
Dissemination to Information Media

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**HOW TO BUILD A CORPORATE DESIGN AS A MODERN INFORMATION PROVIDER
and
IMPORTING DATA SETS AND INFORMATION RELEASED THROUGH THE INTERNET TO
THE MEDIA**

Joint paper submitted by Luxembourg and Belgium¹

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1. Introduction

In talking about « dissemination » we are referring to all the methods used for that purpose; and « public » means all the potential user groups, starting with the "man in the street" and covering students, businesses, the financial world, before ending with highly specialised university research institutes requiring in-depth data.

And between alle these: the press !!!

What is its role here?

Can it improve our image as data producers?

Is the press necessary in order to reach the various user groups we want to reach?

Do we need the press more than the press needs us?

Can we manage without the press?

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Obviously we are dealing here with the role of the press in relaying the data disseminated by the producers.

That is the first point that we want to discuss.

Next we come to the second subject which we wish to tackle, still in the world of the press.

The Internet has brought a genuine revolution in the dissemination of information: no one will doubt that. Depending on the policy adopted, the information placed on the web may be meagre or comprehensive, sometimes well organised and structured, sometimes haphazard.

Is this a good or a bad thing?

What about the methods used, the concepts tackled?

What about the minimum level of explanation that needs to accompany the data to make them comprehensible?

Meta-data have to be organised; what is the optimum system of organisation offering the best way of reaching our ultimate customers.

2. Brand image of our Institutions

2.1. Why a joint presentation by STATEC and NBB?

2.1.1 STATEC

A small statistical institute in a highly dynamic economic area, STATEC is obliged to develop rapidly in order to meet a high level of demand, not only from European institutions but also from private users.

Its former main task, which was to supply the government and its departments with statistical data, surveys and expert reports, is nowadays only one aspect of a broad range of services which it is required to provide.

The characteristic feature of the Luxembourg statistical system, in simplistic terms, is that data production is decentralised whereas data dissemination is organised more centrally. Thus, STATEC collects a large quantity of data produced by various public bodies and passes them on, thus providing a service for its users, saving them the burden to contact multiple sources.

It regularly collaborates in the surveys conducted by government research centres and publishes the results of those surveys.

STATEC operates in an extremely open economic environment, which accounts for the particularly high level of demand for statistical data in Luxembourg. The presence of a large number of foreign companies and multinationals and the high proportion of foreign residents (over one third of the population) increase demand.

The Internet is a particularly useful way of dealing with this, especially for an institute with limited human resources. We can mention by way of example subscriptions to press releases, which have increased ten-fold since 1998. With yesterday's dissemination methods, STATEC could never have served the subscribers promptly and simultaneously, without clogging up the whole dissemination system for an entire day.

2.1.1 NBB

Where the NBB is concerned, one could say that, apart from its role as a central bank, its function is certainly to produce and disseminate statistical series, and this it has been doing for many years. Originally the data produced were intended mainly for internal use, namely for the Research department, the real mainspring of macro-economic analysis.

Demand rapidly extended beyond the confines of our institution and we provided a statistical database available to everyone, the aptly named *Belgostat*.

Several years ago, following the usual, inevitable political tribulations, the National Accounts Institute was set up, largely overseen by the National Bank of Belgium, and with the collaboration of the NSI, dealing – as its name implies – with the National Accounts, but also with Foreign Trade.

The Bank takes charge of the administrative management of international programmes such as SDDS (IMF).

But then, why STATEC - NBB?

In the end, it is very simple; our two countries are geographically close, small in size, and with a clientele which we assume to be largely the same.

Published material has to comply with language requirements in Luxembourg and in Belgium.

As our two institutions are so close, we maintain frequent contact and also take part in a Eurostat working party on "Dissemination of statistical information" at the European Commission.

We really do think that there is an urgent need for more contacts between institutions like ours in order to establish European publication standards and common working methods with a view to improve access to statistical data intended for an ever wider public, and giving users a clearer idea of our work and our products.

We are aiming at a common approach to the presentation of data tables, uniformity in the design of the graphs and the dissemination of methodological notices which are more effective and easier to read, starting at European level, but why not at the level of the countries represented in our assembly.

2.2 Our brand image

This brand image requires constant attention as regards both our « paper » publications and those on the web, our special electronic output or the answers given to individual questions by our Datashop.

How do we go about it?

The new information technologies are the primary means of making our institutions more visible. Electronic media enable us to publish faster and cheaper, to reach every corner of our world in no time at all. We shall say more about this in section 3 of this document.

At the moment, our two institutions can still take advantage of the fact that they enjoy a degree of monopoly. We have expertise and experience in our field, acquired over many years. In the absence of competitors capable of publishing faster than us, we can be more meticulous about the quality of our products. Let us make use of that to establish perfect credibility.

We shall now deal more systematically with a few of the conventions established by our institutions.

For all forms of publication, we suggest a pleasing layout which offers easy access while retaining a substantial content of quality data. It is surely a good thing to adhere to dissemination schedules in order to avoid any loss of credibility, but this must not be at the expense of product quality.

Quality must be the primary consideration from the point of view of both staff competence and speed of response.

Layout: for "paper" publications, though demand is falling as electronic products come on to the market, it is vital for covers to be attractive, colourful and of good quality. The inside pages must also be of good quality.

As "paper" customers are declining in number, why make them suffer with dowdy publications which are badly printed and often expensive?

The above points continue to apply to CD-ROMs, other electronic products or the web; general presentation is always important;

Easy access: we try to minimise the changes to the structure of the tables disseminated from one period to the next, in order not to inconvenience the reader.
We prefer to keep the tables in the same positions within each publication.
The tables retain the same identification number from one period to the next.
Our «paper » publications are disseminated according to topic (foreign trade, national accounts, etc.).
Tables of contents are carefully structured, clear and precise.
Our tables are all based on a common backbone, a basic template.
In our electronic publications a system of key words and links between tables and the meta-data relating to them make it easy to find data.

Except, of course, for « paper » publications, our customers must be able to download our data on to their own administrative systems. They must also be able to rework them according to their own needs.

A PDF format is often inappropriate; intelligent formats which are easy to reuse and convert are preferable.

Some customers will need to be able to download our data on a large scale on to huge data systems; this applies particularly to universities.

Contents The series disseminated will cover a long enough period of time to permit meaningful statistical analysis by university researchers.
The tables will be clear and easy to read; let us not forget that our customers are not necessarily all familiar with our jargon. What about journalists, for example, who are rarely statisticians but usually economists. So we need to be precise, leaving no scope for misinterpretation of the various concepts which are so simple to us as experts.

Let us highlight some other minor points which seem obvious to us but which we tend to forget:

- a "flashing" logo which attracts the customer's attention because it looks good, and which permits rapid identification of the publishing institution
- mention of information sources
- contact numbers for people in the institutions

Quality The series disseminated must be guaranteed; we must not publish just anything without prior verification.
The National Bank of Belgium is currently setting up a huge programme with this in mind, training experts in mathematical statistics.

Adherence to dissemination timetables

Dissemination timetables must be published and we must stick to them.
There must be a precise procedure for dispatching the data disseminated.

Thus, NBB adheres to a dissemination schedule for dispatching a particular item:

- 1- 15.30 e-mails to preferential customers (though they cannot modify the information in any way), indicating any timing embargo. This mainly concerns press agencies - to give them time to prepare their articles before going to press – and ministerial offices)
- 2- 16.00 publication on our Internet site
- 3- 16.30 e-mails sent to non-preferential customers (on request)
- 4- the next day: dispatch of « paper » publications by post.

You will note that e-mails are sent out simultaneously and automatically at the times specified in the schedule.

STATEC has not set any specific schedule for issuing its announcements. Nevertheless, editorial office practice is taken into account by issuing announcements simultaneously before noon, avoiding the end of the week if possible.

Press releases:

Press releases adhere to a fixed layout, containing succinct information which journalists can easily reprocess.

We certainly must not neglect the appearance of the releases, which need to be « attractive ». We voluntarily limit these releases to a maximum of two or three pages.

Service

For all forms of publication, the service supplied to customers needs to be of good quality in terms of the answers given and the time taken to supply them.

In our case, it is the Datashop that normally has to deal with customer inquiries.

We consider that this Datashop should be an integral part of the circulation set-up.

In any case, we consider that this unit plays a vital role in presenting our image to the outside world. It will also provide an "after-sales service" for our publications, capable of explaining the methodology used, the accuracy of a figure, adherence to schedules, etc., within a maximum of 24 hours.

The team should therefore comprise high calibre staff capable of coping with the mass of questions raised by customers with a highly varied understanding of statistics. These people must be bilingual, if not trilingual, with a good knowledge of the database and the methodology.

They will have comprehensive IT equipment and all the necessary links with other data producers at home and abroad. We are thinking particularly of international institutions (Eurostat, IMF, BIS, ECB, etc.).

Their role will also extend to redirecting customers to the producers if they cannot provide the inquirer with an immediate answer.

In the case of the NBB and STATEC, this relay role is all the more important in that they already act as the central collection point for data produced by other organisations

And what about the press in all this?

It is true that up to now we have been telling you what we are doing to ensure that we project a positive brand image. And all this can be either negated or enhanced by the press.

Its role is to relay our information to the general public. It will do so objectively only if our message is clear and unambiguous and the journalists have understood it properly.

It is therefore crucial to stick to all the points which we have mentioned.

Journalists are unquestionably sensitive:

- to the clarity of the tables and press releases which we supply;
- adherence to our dissemination schedules, and the accuracy of those schedules;
- simultaneous release of announcements (one agency must not get ahead of another)
- the speed with which we answer individual questions
- the attractiveness of the topics which we suggest to them
- the transparency of the concepts used

We must never forget that journalists are not statisticians; they do not understand the whole subject; what they pass on to the public may therefore be totally wrong. It is our job to ensure that our message is clear, and to react in order to correct their mistakes.

If these conditions are met, the press will act as a springboard for our institutions.

Do we need the press to reach the public that we want to target?

Obviously, this question does not concern experienced statisticians who are familiar with our jargon and the methods used.

These experts represent only a marginal group among our customers; we must acknowledge that the press is an essential intermediary in the circulation of our data, because it will translate our sometimes abstruse concepts into everyday language.

So we cannot manage without them. We must adapt to their demands.

If we agree that the press plays a basic role in bringing our data to the general public, we must conclude that we should take the initiative and approach the press.

1. via press releases
 - issued regularly
 - of good quality
 - on topics of interest to a broad and varied public
 - in a standard electronic format
 - in the form of handy files with a content which is easy to handle
2. via press conferences
3. via other less conventional means (information and training days, panels, etc.)
4. by providing them with a full « after-sales » service which enables journalists to take their research further by putting them into contact with the experts and giving them access to detailed documentation

3. Reaching the user via the Internet

The second section of this paper will deal with the Internet and how we approach customers (regulars and the press) via this new medium.

The stampede to get on the web has very rapidly reached a peak.

Thousands of sites have been very hastily set up, and we often find that they lack preparation. Masses of information have been « thrown » at the general public any old how.

Where trivial information is concerned, that matters very little in the end.

In our sector, that is not the case; this is a serious matter, and any inefficiency could destroy the brand image that we have struggled so hard to build up. The Internet enables us to communicate with the entire world; it also enables the entire world to detect our weaknesses and shortcomings immediately. The Internet has become our showcase, and a poor display may be fatal for our cause.

Our sites therefore need to respect all the points that we made in the first part of our paper. In Belgium, at least at the Bank, we have decided to make available on the web all the statistical information from our database, BELGOSTAT, free of charge as far as the latest data are concerned. For historical series we advise our customers to use our Belgostat CD-ROM, issued quarterly.

The STATEC site adopts a slightly different approach. It in fact contains two separate sections:

1. basic statistical data for the "general public" accessible free of charge,
2. detailed data available in the form of files which can be downloaded, accessible on payment of a subscription.

But whatever the dissemination policy, it is not the provision of statistical data that causes us the greatest concern.

However, we have a common problem to resolve: the provision of methodology.

At the moment, we must acknowledge that not all the necessary methodology is available on our sites.

At STATEC, we are considering a project for the presentation and structuring of meta-data which should facilitate access to everyone without swamping the user needing a succinct definition, and without failing to satisfy those seeking a more sophisticated methodology. The table below is intended to explain that structure:

Provision and structuring of meta-data for a given variable

links	detail	information supplied
Variable	Ⓜ Minimum definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ name of variable ▪ unit ▪ reference period
	Ⓜ Detailed definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ concept ▪ source ▪ calculation method ▪ information on any breaks in the series
	Ⓜ Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ differences in relation to other, familiar common concepts ▪ explanation of changes over time (in relation to economic and social phenomena, society events etc.)
	Ⓜ Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NSI publications ▪ non-NSI publications
	Ⓜ www links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ statistical system ▪ other
	Ⓜ specific contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ experts' particulars (telephone and fax numbers, e-mail addresses)

At the central bank we have established links with the IMF site under the SDDS programme. It should be possible to develop the final site by the end of 2000.

The Bank's position regarding the methodology circulated on the web is well-defined and will be divided into three sections:

- 1- Definitions:
 - methods used
 - presentation of algorithms
 - descriptions of conventions
 - statistical concepts
 - descriptions of statistical variables

- 2- Classifications:
 - description, extent, duration of validity
 - relations between NBB and associate producers
 - contacts
 - codes, labels
 - languages
 - thesaurus

- 3- Description of files and identifiers
 - chronological series
 - multi-dimensional tables
 - graphs
 - bibliography