

**UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS STATISTICS DIRECTORATE**

Joint UNECE/OECD Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication
(14-15 February 2005, Henley-on-Thames, United Kingdom)

Topic (iii): How to train and educate statisticians to tell the story behind the numbers

ON- AND OFF-THE-JOB TRAINING - DANISH EXPERIENCES

Invited Paper

Submitted by Statistics Denmark¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. It could be argued that there is really no need to train and educate statisticians to tell the story behind the numbers, as National Statistical Institutions (NSIs) have the option, instead, of hiring professional “storytellers” (journalists, communicators, etc.) and leaving the job to them. I shall not go into this discussion here but just point out that NSIs, for a number of reasons, have decided otherwise.

2. At the same time, it is apparent that newly educated “statisticians” in general are not well trained and educated for precisely this part of the job - and neither are other professionals with a degree in, e.g., the social or natural sciences. It is surprising when you realize that all of these students have learned how to write an interesting essay or article in upper secondary school. When they leave University some years later, however, this gift has sadly disappeared and it is not automatically re-acquired during their first years in jobs.

3. Hence, when NSIs decide to improve their “storytelling” capabilities, they normally hire a small number of professional communicators and use them to improve the overall performance of the organization, i.e. the statisticians. At least, this is what we have been doing at Statistics Denmark for a number of years with a fair amount of success, and we have been using a multi-faceted approach, which I shall try to describe in the following.

II. DAILY DIALOGUE ON THE JOB

4. Basic training in communication skills of statisticians at Statistics Denmark takes place on the job in dialogue with communication professionals on the texts of our press releases. I shall explain this in greater detail.

5. Our most basic form of statistical storytelling is the press release *News from Statistics Denmark* (“Nyt fra Danmarks Statistik”), which appears 500 times a year, i.e. on average, two releases every working day. When I started at Statistics Denmark in 1999, we were in the process of formulating a strategy reaching forward to 2005. I suggested introducing a sentence to the strategy that stated: “In the dissemination of statistical products - with particular reference to *News from Statistics Denmark* - statistical professionalism and communication expertise are regarded as equally important”. This “Principle of Equal Professional Rights” has since proven very useful in daily work.

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6. The production, form and content of the two-page publication *News from Statistics Denmark* are strictly governed by internal guidelines. As a matter of fact, a new and revised set of guidelines has just been issued to replace the former guidelines from 2001. The manuscript for *News* starts off in a Statistical Division, sometimes simply as an update of the last edition of the publication in question, sometimes as a completely new text. The statistician or clerk writing the first draft of the *News* has to bear in mind that the media are the primary target group and that the text should be understandable to a journalist with no prior knowledge of the subject matter.

7. The draft manuscript should focus on the news about the statistic, containing a headline and at least one easily understandable graph. Of course, this task is solved according to the talents of various writers, but, by 10 a.m. at the latest the day before publication, the draft manuscript is forwarded to the editor of *News* in the Dissemination Centre. Here, it is read by a communication professional whose job it is to suggest improvements and changes to the text.

8. At the moment, our staff of communication professionals in the Dissemination Centre comprises five persons. We prefer to employ people with different communication backgrounds: at the moment, we have a trained journalist with media experience, someone with a master's degree in Danish language and literature, two with master's degrees in communication, and one economist who has worked as a journalist. Each of them is assigned to a number of specific editions of the monthly statistical *News*, but they are also on duty one day a week to take care of any other *News* received by the editor on that day.

9. The job of the communication professionals is to improve the draft manuscript as much as possible in the narrow span of time between 10 a.m. and noon, when the finished manuscript will go to our graphic division for printing. This happens in a dialogue that can take place via e-mail, telephone or face-to-face contact. Ideally, the communication professionals provide feed-back on the draft, suggesting possible improvements, arguing for a change of focus, etc. Occasionally, the communication professionals will re-write certain passages or larger part of the text.

10. When this dialogue is at its best, both parties involved learn from it, improving their performance next time. When it goes less successfully, both parties simply get a confirmation of their preconceived ideas about the other party!

11. In principle, the dialogue should continue until both participants are satisfied with the text: it must both be statistically correct and communicate well. Often, it is agreed that the story should be improved, but there is not enough time to change the manuscript radically. Instead, we can agree to improve the next press release on the statistics in question - this agreement is written into our internal publication system for reference.

12. If it should occasionally happen that the statistician and the communication professional cannot reach an agreement on the text and the disagreement is a matter of principle, then the Head of Communication and the Head of the Statistical Division discuss the matter in order to reach agreement. If this also proves impossible, the version from the Statistical Division is printed and the Head of Communication will invite the parties to a meeting at a later date to settle the difference of opinion.

13. The advantage of this form of on-the-job training is that both the statisticians and the communication professionals learn from the process, provided both parties take the time to explain and argue their points in a constructive dialogue. This procedure has been followed at Statistics Denmark for some years now, and the rules of the game are well-established, and are used for other texts than the *News* as well.

14. The disadvantage of this method is that it is not well-suited to major changes in the dissemination format, and the short deadlines often make it impossible to discuss and decide on more principal issues.

III. RECURRING WORKSHOPS

15. In 2001, we decided to do something about the shortcomings of the dialogue model. Hence, we introduced the so-called “News-Workshops”. This was in connection with the introduction of our first set of guidelines for *News from Statistics Denmark*, because we wanted to make sure that all statistical divisions did, in fact, start to use the new guidelines.

16. The *News-Workshop* is offered by the Dissemination Centre to all statistical divisions. It is not obligatory, but to this point only one division has declined the offer - and that division was closed down shortly afterwards! The purpose of the workshop is to discuss the *News* from the statistical division and to reach agreement on improvements for the quality of communication. Statistical divisions with many publications are split into two or more workshops, in order to limit the number of publications at each workshop to 8-10.

17. The participants in the workshops are the statisticians and clerks involved in the actual publications, the editor of the *News*, two communication professionals, the Head of Communication and the Head of the Statistical Division in question. At the workshops, we start out by presenting some interesting examples from other countries as inspiration or some new methods in communication. After that, we go through the publications one by one, providing criticism, praise and hard-core data on the actual use of the *News* by the public and the media. Thanks to an advanced database containing all press quotations, we are able to provide exact data on the use of every publication, both online and in the press, which ensures a good discussion.

18. Over the course of the workshop, we make deals and agreements for future improvements. The end result is a written report, which is forwarded to the Head of the Statistical Division for approval. Our experiences with the workshop format are very good. In general, the statisticians react very favourably to this kind of detailed attention to their publications, and the dialogue has generally been very constructive.

19. The drawback to the workshop format is that it is rather time-consuming. Each workshop demands meticulous preparation involving several people in the Dissemination Centre to make sure that all ideas for improvement are collected and that the facts and arguments are prepared. This means that our capacity in the Dissemination Centre is 8-10 workshops each year, corresponding to workshops with three or four statistical divisions a year. This, in turn, means that it takes three years to come full circle with all the statistical divisions.

IV. INTERNAL COURSES

20. All newly-employed staff members are given a short (three-hour) introduction to general dissemination issues shortly after their start at Statistics Denmark. In our education programme proper, we have three different internal courses dealing with statistical communication:

21. The *Press Course* lasts one day and is compulsory for all employees who deal with media contacts. This is a large part of the staff members, since responsibility for press communication is extremely decentralized. The course employs internal and external teachers and the purpose is to make the statisticians and clerks aware of the working conditions and requirements of the press. The staff members are given an introduction to journalistic focus and are taught how to see the news angle in their statistics.

22. The course *Efficient Written Communication* is a hands-on course lasting two full days and employing an external teacher. The course is compulsory for all staff members - for statisticians in the first part of their career. The focus is on all forms of written communication - not specifically publications or storytelling. The course is rather popular and our general experiences are good.

23. The course *To Tell with Statistics* is a very recent addition to our internal education programme. As a matter of fact, we haven't had one yet! The course is inspired by the interest in “statistical

storytelling” in this group and among communication directors at several NSIs. The course lasts two full days and is intended for statisticians who have already learned basic communication skills in the previously mentioned course on written communication. The purpose of this course - employing both external and internal teachers - is to arrive at a common notion of quality in statistical communication, to teach statisticians how to tell the story behind the figures and to make statistics attractive to audiences. This course is compulsory for statisticians as part of their internal curriculum.

24. You may have noticed that this paper does not mention external courses in communication or storytelling. That is because we do not use external courses in communication for statisticians, but our communication professionals, of course, attend such courses to keep up to date. As for statisticians, we want to build a capacity to implement such courses internally.

V. RECRUITING

25. In recruiting new staff members to the statistical divisions, communication skills have until now not been required - or even regarded as an additional qualification. In the Communication Division, we would like to change this and to begin raising it as a matter for discussion. Right now, we are in the process of writing a language policy for Statistics Denmark, and we have raised the question in our discussion of the implementation of this policy. Since almost all statisticians are asked to communicate their figures to the general public, why is it that we don't look for communication skills when recruiting them?

30. The discussion on this proposal will take place after the deadline for this paper – but before our workshop in Henley-on-Thames. Hence, during my presentation of this paper, I shall know more about the attitudes toward this proposal in our organization.

30. PERSPECTIVES

27. In organizations relying heavily on quantitative information, the most efficient way of managing change is by making it quantitatively visible. If it is important to an NSI to reach out to a broader public and to achieve a wider use of its figures, you have to be able to put up numerical targets for the organization and for the statistical divisions to reach.

30. In Statistics Denmark, we have taken steps in this direction. We have for several years been able to measure our press coverage in quantitative terms – simply by counting the number of quotations in the press. We are working to develop this measure, to be able to add qualitative information to the quantitative. Nevertheless, negative press coverage amounts to less than one percent of our total coverage, so the total results will be only marginally affected.

29. We have an overall target of increasing the total media coverage each year, compared to the previous year. Since the start of this year, we have been able to relate our media coverage directly to the publication (mostly, the *News*) quoted in the media or, at least, to the statistical division responsible for the subject matter area. This provides us with media coverage statistics, published monthly in the organization, showing just how much (or how little) each statistical division contributes to reaching the overall target.

30. From January of this year, Management has set as a formal target that each of our three statistical departments increase their portion of media coverage. This will certainly increase interest in the statistical division as to how to achieve such an increase. Improved statistical storytelling will be an important tool here.
