

**Joint UNECE/OECD Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication**  
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Topic (iii): How to train and educate statisticians to tell the story behind the numbers

**THE JOY OF TELLING A GOOD STATISTICAL STORY**

**Invited Paper**

Submitted by Statistics Norway<sup>1</sup>

**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. This paper presents the training system of statisticians in handling dissemination and contacts with the media at Statistics Norway, with a focus on the presentation of analysis.

2. At the end of the paper, you will find a scheme presenting our system of courses. At the start of this paper, two main problems will be highlighted:

**A. How do we ensure a minimum level of quality?**

3. This is the main aim of the internal courses offered to statisticians. New employees at Statistics Norway attend a basic course, where one day is dedicated to dissemination and contact with the media. Hege Pedersen is in charge of the part "Five minutes of fame", a practical training in how to deal with the media and a lecture called "What is good dissemination, and why?" Most employees also attend the course in writing "Today's statistics". The basic aim of this course is to encourage statisticians to write short articles of interest to the media and the public in general. We also encourage them to write articles for the Statistical Magazine, Samfunnsspeilet (Social Survey) and Economic Survey, as well as chronicles in newspapers.

**B. How do we make statisticians great storytellers?**

4. "The writing school" is our main tool here. It is described in more detail below. These courses are usually attended by young and less experienced statisticians. Most of them are eager to improve their writer skills. However, it is often difficult to persuade good writers to attend courses that can make them even better, because they often don't see communication as a profession. It is our experience that younger employees are more open to dissemination and communication of statistics because they have a different relationship to the media and are not as rooted in traditional ways of doing things.

5. Having said that, Statistics Norway does have some very good storytellers and who are often in the media. Some are natural talents and some become increasingly better as experience boosts their confidence. They are all great assets to Statistics Norway, the problem is that they are unevenly spread in the organisation. We have some very experienced people commenting the statistics on for instance macroeconomics, demography and migration. But when journalists look for storytellers or talking heads

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from other subject areas they are often disappointed although we have highly qualified statisticians and analysts working in these fields. It is also important to observe that good storytellers often are genuinely interested in their field of work and thus interested in the current public debate in their area of interest.

6. To encourage more people to become good storytellers and to participate in the public debate, we invite experienced resource persons in Statistics Norway to speak on a course in media training, which is held twice a year. These people are good role models. They have the confidence to step out of the traditional researcher role and tell stories and tell/speak their own opinion in the current discussions.

## **II. PRESENTATION OF SOME MAIN IDEAS BEHIND THE COURSES IN STORYTELLING**

### **A. How do we train people to become fond of writing? How do we make them aware of their skills?**

7. Our courses in writing always contain a number of lessons forcing the statisticians to write there and then. An assignment that is frequently used is to write about a topic that has little to do with what they work with, i.e. they may be asked what a nice day at Statistics Norway may look like. These exercises often result in a few good texts, well written, proving to us and the author that they can write in an inspiring way if they want. Why not use their skills in the dissemination of statistics? It may seem that they are their own worst enemies and that they have greater potential than they think they have.

8. Another assignment is to analyse tables or figures presenting data that they are not very familiar with. For instance, we may ask experts on foreign trade statistics to look at a table illustrating the tendency among people to report being victims of violence. This kind of exercise often results in good texts, and the underlying message is: Try to take the stand of a non-expert when analysing and presenting your data. What would they want to know? How do you assure that they grasp your points? And which points do they have to grasp in order to get your message? When asked to present data that they are not all too familiar with they often write better articles, articles that contain more text and less figures. This is because they avoid most of the foreign and technical terms they tend to use when they write about topics they are familiar with.

### **B. How do we train statisticians to love publicity, to become "attention-seekers", and to see the good stories behind their figures?**

9. If you are good at statistical storytelling, you can get a lot of attention. Many (most?) statisticians dislike that kind of attention, or attention at all. They want to be left in peace with their data.

10. Our aim is to tell our colleagues that analysis, storytelling and attention actually can be quite rewarding and fun. By telling the story in your way, it is more likely that it is told with the precision and angling that you want, and not according to what journalists find interesting after ten minutes of intensive thinking ahead of the nine o'clock editorial meeting. You get to know your own data better. Some analysis can be used in order to get less contact with journalists about repeated questions. We sometimes ask statisticians to write articles that cover the most frequently asked questions from the media, for instance articles on Christmas shopping, holiday habits, immigrants, smoking habits, crime etc.

11. The value of good examples should not be underestimated. The more people in statistics agencies that are trained in storytelling, the more obvious it will be to the others that this may be a rewarding business. It is quite flattering to get attention to your story, to feel that a wide audience take interest in the figures that you struggle to understand and give meaning.

### C. Building networks for text sharing

12. The fear of sharing: Many people are afraid of showing their text to the colleague next door. They seem to prefer to share their mistakes with the rest of the world by publishing immature texts at the web.

13. On the other hand: It is not easy to share a text with someone you do not know very well. A good story contains personal style, although the text is politically impartial and does not contain personal evaluations of the data. To present such a text to someone is always painful, especially if the text is at a more or less immature level. As we usually say at the start of courses: The text is your baby, and we should treat it like that. When your friends show you their babies, you do not comment on their strange looking ears or peculiar nose, even if they are strange looking and peculiar. The sharing of texts with colleagues at many stages in their elaboration is absolutely necessary in order to assure quality.

14. At our courses, the participants will be told to present a text that they are working on. This presentation will be in front of an audience of 10-15 colleagues, some of which they have not seen before or do not know very well. If we manage to do this in a proper and careful way, the participants will learn that texts can and should be shared, even at an early stage. They may even meet trustworthy and clever commentators at the course.

15. I think this point is of high importance. Innumerable man-hours are spent by inexperienced (and experienced) writers who don't know how to develop their text further. Either they don't write a word, or they start off in the wrong direction. This is a waste of resources, and worse: It often makes people believe that they are useless when it comes to writing.

### D. Long-term purpose: Establish new cultures

16. The law of Jante is a Scandinavian concept, although the law applies to a greater or lesser extent all over the world. Jante is a small town in Denmark, invented by the Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose. In many cultures, standing out from the crowd can be hard. The first paragraph in the law of Jante reads: You shall not believe that you are something. Paragraph two reads: You shall not believe that you are as good as we are. Statisticians who write well and get a lot of publicity, will often be victims of the Jante mentality. And just wait for the day that they make a mistake ... Do we talk about envy?

17. So, our courses is an attempt at building counter cultures, teaching our colleagues to appreciate attention from the media, and reminding them that they as well as Statistics Norway will benefit from it in the long run. In fact, it is a necessity for Statistics Norway. An invisible statistics agency is not worth the money. But the problem with highly visible employees is often that they are more likely to get attractive job offers from the outside world ...

## III. PRESENTATION OF SOME OF THE PRACTICAL ADVICE GIVEN DURING COURSES

18. One of the advantages of a well-written article is that it does not need to be rewritten by journalists before they use it. The content is easier to understand and therefore more attractive. And at the same time, a source of error is eliminated. The statisticians have more *control* over the information and how it is presented.

19. In courses in writing "Today's statistics", which is held twice a year, we encourage the participants to think like journalists when they write. In addition to this course, Statistics Norway's translator and I (Hege), have visited almost half of the divisions in Statistics Norway to talk about effective dissemination in Norwegian and English. One of the problems is that it is difficult to reach out to the general public, experts and colleagues at the same time.

20. We often repeat that they have to think of a broad audience when they write, not other experts or their boss. Pretend that you write to a clever student aged 17 or your old aunt. We try to get them to think about the question: What do I want my readers to learn from this article? Is it something new, a sensation in the data this month/quarter/year? What is the most important finding, is it something that affects many people or will make a great difference in their professional or private life or in their municipality?

21. The majority of the "Today's statistics" contain many figures, of course. Many people have problems with understanding large figures, and if they cannot understand what the figures mean to them, they don't bother to read the article.

22. We encourage the writers not to look at the tables while writing, but to write one page of text without using any figures. Most of them find it very difficult. They are worried that they don't write accurate enough. And to avoid presenting almost exactly the same article every month with only small changes in the figures, we ask the writers to put away the previous article and focus on the new one with a fresh heading and angle.

23. To get the media's attention, we teach the statisticians to write and think like journalists. They have to begin their article with the most important information. I (Hege) have had some discussions with statisticians because they refuse to draw attention to their article and themselves. Some try to avoid attention from the media by writing boring articles where the important information is hidden in the text because they don't like to speak with journalists or to be quoted.

24. It is important not only to disseminate the figures and the new data, but also to focus on causes and effects. Research has found that people remember more of the content if the article contains information on causes and effects. Many writers find it difficult and improper to focus on this. But some of the resource-persons in Statistics Norway do this in a brilliant way, and more and more statisticians follow in their footsteps.

#### **IV. INHERENT DILEMMAS AND PROBLEMS**

##### **A. Enthusiasm vs. discipline**

25. Statistics agencies are often characterised by centralised power, strict routines and little room for creativity and initiative. There are many reasons why it has to be like this. We have to have a certain level of assured quality: precision and timeliness are important in getting the message across. But does this culture provide enough room for good storytelling, which is indeed a product of creativity and new ways of thinking.

26. A by-product of the emphasis on central control and assured quality is low interest in extra productivity or personal promotion. The emphasis on doing exactly what you are told often results in people who carry out their tasks but nothing more than that.

##### **B. Priority to storytelling vs. dissemination of even more numbers or databanks**

27. When do we have the courage to say: Our figures and statistics are good enough, let's put more emphasis on the stories behind the figures. For instance, by concentrating more effort on preparing self-service systems in our data shops, fewer resources will be spent on storytelling, according to my (Dag's) experience. The stories will be told by others, often less qualified to evaluate the value of the data. And our storytellers will have to do less interesting jobs, putting them in the role of supporters of statistical raw data.

28. Last autumn, we evaluated the 830 "Today's Statistics" to find out which texts could be made shorter. We are working on this, and the goal is to reduce the number of "Today's statistics" by 20-25 per

cent. The time and resources that is freed up should be spent on writing more and better stories and to look at the stories behind the numbers.

**C. Enthusiastic statisticians and top management vs. conservative middle management**

29. Statistics Norway's top management are very enthusiastic about dissemination in general and statistical storytelling in particular. At our courses we meet young and enthusiastic statisticians who are eager to write articles based on their data. They take great interest in listening to the advice offered by Hege and myself, but then say: I can't show this to my middle manager. He has told me that our articles should always start by commenting on and highlighting the total figures. But in this case they are boring, they don't tell the story that people want to hear, except those who have to. You only find the interesting trends by breaking down the figures. I know, they will tell us, but it just isn't done that way. In their division, the manager will have a strong group of people supporting his view.

**D. Statisticians trained in writing articles vs. journalists trained in statistics**

30. We have no clear answer to this question, but we know for certain that it can be expensive to keep good journalists. We also know that statisticians don't like to be mere suppliers of raw material to journalists. If they don't get the chance to write articles based on their data, we will lose some of our best people.

31. And if we do employ journalists, they must have experience. My (Hege's) experience is that it is necessary to be a trained journalist, or at least to have worked as a journalist for some time, to get the statisticians to listen to your advice, both when it comes to "What is good dissemination", and how to write correct Norwegian. In my first year at Statistics Norway, many asked me about my background and previous work experience. It felt like my qualifications were being tested.

## V. THE SYSTEM OF COURSES

