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- (ii) Improving outreach using Web 2.0, social media and multimedia

SOCIAL MEDIA OR HOW TO PROMOTE STATISTICAL LITERACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Submitted by Statistics Estonia¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The spread of new media has considerably expanded the possibilities for people to act as creators of their own information environment. Those interested in the activities of a particular organisation can keep themselves informed via the Internet. Internet definitely increases the openness and transparency of the organisation's activities. But we are all aware of the fact that making information available on the Internet is not sufficient to make actual communication between the organisation and its target groups possible. Accomplishment of this goal requires motivated action from both parties. Is it social media a long-awaited solution for bilateral communication?

2. The use of social media shows a growing trend in the state agencies of Estonia. Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs has done the most thorough work in this field as they have established their own blog, accounts on Facebook and Twitter, and a virtual embassy on Second Life. The President of Estonia has a website on Facebook; for several years already, the New Year's greeting of the President of Estonia can be followed on YouTube.

3. Numerous Estonian companies also use social media. For example, the majority of national daily newspapers have opened their own corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts. The Estonian energy company Eesti Energia, operating on the international market, has its own corporate blog, and so does the Estonian national air carrier Estonian Air. A lot of Estonian organisations and businesses have, in search of clients and potential customers, made their way to social networks.

4. To disseminate official statistics, Statistics Estonia opened its accounts on Twitter and Facebook and launched its statistics blog in 2010. Information on these sites is provided in Estonian. Our main purpose is to make statistical information available to the Estonian people in Estonia and abroad.

II. GOALS, OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA

A. Statistics Estonia has two goals in using social media

- 1) Organisation's internal goals;
- 2) External goals.

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5. About 330 employees work for Statistics Estonia. Our main internal goal is focused on enhancing the employees' capacity to analyse different matters and offering an outlet for that analysis. The future of Statistics Estonia depends on how widespread statistical literacy is in the society. Thus, it is important for Statistics Estonia to be able to share the knowledge of our statisticians. It is essential to provide more international comparisons and many-sided discussions on different subject areas as well as to set up relations between different sources and subject areas.

6. In addition, statisticians, and not just the communications and marketing staff, should learn how to use the new channels that consumers use in searching for statistical information. This education about new media, requires practice and time to get used to the features of a new channel — for instance, writing on the Web or blog is different from writing a traditional analytical article. Statisticians should also get used to direct and instantaneous communication and be ready to receive feedback on the posts from the readers of the blog as well as be prepared to react to it.

7. Our external goals focus on our customers. The primary target here is for our statisticians to be well informed about all the different channels forming the infosphere of our society as well as to promote official statistics and statistical literacy through these channels. Our purpose is both to find new customers and keep the current ones. Also important are keeping track of the hot issues in today's society and participation in the discussions of these issues through social media, communication with customers, finding out and adapting to their needs, and encouraging customers to provide direct feedback.

8. For Statistics Estonia, the use of social media is a question of image among its own employees as well as the wider public. We would like the society to see Statistics Estonia as an open and innovative organisation. We would also like to alter the current identity of official statistics and Statistics Estonia, which has been characterized as dry and formal.

B. Content is primary, but time and human resources should also be taken into account

9. In Statistics Estonia, the idea to use social media to communicate statistics was initiated by the Marketing and Dissemination Department. We made the channels public this year, but the preparations started half a year earlier. The principles of using social media channels have not yet been formalised in the dissemination policy of Statistics Estonia. While starting in 2010, our main goal was to become familiar with social media channels and also to encourage our statisticians to use them. However, in the course of preparations and before making a public appearance, we thought about how to ensure that these channels are going to be used by the public for a long time, what topics to reflect, who of the statisticians could be the potential blog writers, how often to write posts, and by which means to notify the public of fresh blog posts. Besides, we tried to establish a framework for our Facebook and Twitter accounts in terms of content, frequency of updates and prospective administrators. We have worked out the general principles of using social media channels and we intend to describe them in our dissemination policy sometime in the future after gaining more practical experience.

10. To let users know about these new information channels, we promote them on our website with graphical notices. Links to these new channels are also added to the e-mail signatures of employees who are involved in marketing activities and communication with the media. In addition, we have referred to the social media channels in promotional letters intended to advertise our publications. We also point them out when presenting our products and services. We notify journalists of our new blog posts and forward relevant information to our own employees through the Intranet.

11. Three of the 20 employees working for the Marketing and Dissemination Department (Head of Information and Marketing Service; PR Project Manager; Communications Chief) are dealing with the social media on a daily basis in addition to their other duties. One of them, namely the PR Project Manager, had used the social media channels earlier in his work, and on his initiative we made the start. We have no employee specially appointed to be in charge of social media-related work only. Statisticians are involved in this work as blog authors. They write the analyses displayed on the blog apart from their basic job and most often on the blog editor's request. So far, the circle of blog authors consists of about ten people including the Director General.

12. At present, Statistics Estonia does not regularly keep track of any social media channels of other organisations or areas of activity. The company we purchased the media monitoring service from has also offered us a blog monitoring service, which we will definitely consider accepting.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

A. Statistics Estonia on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/Statistikaamet>)

13. Estonia has a population of 1.34 million. The usage of Facebook shows a growing trend. This April, the number of Facebook users in Estonia was estimated to be 187.000; according to the projections made by the Estonian internet marketing experts, this number will grow to 200,000 by the end of June and to 300,000–400,000 by the end of the year. This is a significant target audience to reach. On Facebook, corporate accounts of the most popular Estonian companies have attracted nearly 10,000 fans each, and, for such a small country like Estonia, this number can be regarded as close to maximum. Our target for the first year (2010) is to reach 500 fans.

14. Statistics Estonia created its account on Facebook at the beginning of January. In mid-April the 100th fan joined our site. Consequently, during the first months, about 30 fans joined our fan group each month. From the perspective of image formation, we feel happy that Statistics Estonia's site has numerous fans from among our own personnel. The fact that Statistics Estonia opened its account on Facebook motivated a lot of employees to create their own personal accounts on Facebook.

15. Why should someone want to become Statistics Estonia's fan on Facebook? Our primary aim has been to promote official statistics. In addition to the Statistics Estonia-related news, we also disseminate news about other Baltic Republics, Finland, Eurostat and OECD. Our Facebook site is currently maintained by three administrators (the Head of Information and Marketing Service; PR Project Manager; Communications Chief) who have permission to add information there. We openly acknowledge the fact that we are not able to compete with a news portal. But at the same time, promotion of official statistics about Estonia and our neighbour countries broadens the horizons of our own employees and hopefully of everyone interested in statistics.

16. In Statistics Estonia, we are still testing Facebook as a marketing and bilateral communication channel. So far, we have been promoting the posts of statistics blog and the publications of Statistics Estonia on Facebook. After reading about us on Facebook, people have also taken interest in our blog. We have also received orders for publications through Facebook. Besides that, we plan to offer consumer games on Facebook (for example, a quiz to mark this year's World Statistics Day) to promote official statistics and enlarge the circle of our fans. We are considering using Facebook to spread the word about Statistics Estonia's job announcements now when the unemployment level is high and such offers are of great value.

17. In a long-term perspective it is difficult to estimate whether Facebook will remain popular. Several social networks have experienced high and low tides in popularity. A certain risk of overuse can be perceived among the users. However, internet marketing experts project that for a couple of years to come Facebook will definitely remain in the spotlight and keep holding a lead over other large social media channels.

B. Statistics blog (<http://statistikaamet.wordpress.com>)

18. Electronic dissemination has strongly fostered the dissemination of official statistics. The number of printed publications has been reduced and statistical offices are actively trying to find and make use of new channels. A blog is one such possibility.

19. The purpose of Statistics Estonia's blog is to promote official statistics and statistical literacy as well as to strengthen the public image of those statisticians who add content to the blog as opinion leaders in their own area of statistics. As the number of printed publications is being reduced, the blog offers a good

opportunity for inspiring Statistics Estonia's employees to write about their own area of statistics in a bit more informal style and shorter form and without any obligation to stick to the dates and topics set out in the release calendar. Besides, blog writing also helps to develop employees' analysis skills and skills in writing about statistics — and this, indeed, constitutes one of Statistics Estonia's strategic goals. In addition, it is important to note that a blog is a good place to disclose information that does not fit into traditional channels (news releases, publications) of Statistics Estonia.

20. The target group of our blog embraces the public (media channels, users of statistics, people interested in Statistics Estonia and official statistics, data respondents) as well as Statistics Estonia's own employees.

21. Ideally, the blog provides an opportunity to draw public attention to subjects that are topical within the European Statistical System and in the Estonian society. The blog is also a proper place to introduce new trends and indicators that are measured or the mapping and measurements that are being prepared in the statistical system. During our short blog writing history, we have managed to introduce the Baltic construction market, write about European ports and reflected on the foreign trade of Baltic Republics. We have also promoted Statistics Estonia's products and services by compiling summaries of certain articles and chapters of our analytical publications, published short reviews of international conferences that Statistics Estonia's employees have attended, and their presentations. In the future, we intend to write about population trends, personal survey-related fieldwork and data collection problems. We have shared information about the preparations and progress of the Population Census and written about this year's Agricultural Census.

22. The blog is run on the WordPress platform. The blog is maintained by an editor (Communications Chief) who keeps track of the blog, asks employees to add new posts and sees to it that the comments on displayed posts get answered if needed. We have a goal to display two new posts per week. This way we are trying to gather a permanent circle of interested persons who follow the blog on a regular basis. People can sign up to receive email notifications of new blog posts. Initially it was decided that the posts written by employees would not go through a review and would be added to the blog by employees themselves. But it turned out that we decided it would be better for the editor to review the texts and after that add them to the blog. It is possible, that after the group of people who provide pieces of writing has more or less been established and their posts are published on a regular basis, we might return to the initial work procedure.

23. What was the initial phase of launching the blog like? Writing blog posts is in fact similar to writing a news release —

the structure of text and the information presentation style are quite the same. Maybe this is the reason why the statisticians who usually compile news releases have been more active in writing blog posts and have better accepted the blog as a channel. The support from the management of our institution can be felt since the Director General himself has written several posts for the blog. In general, cautious interest among employees can be perceived within our organisation — posts are being read and the circle of permanent bloggers is shaping up.

24. The blog visiting statistics reveal that the number of persons interested in our blog increases month by month: 2,000 visits were recorded in February; more than 2,600 in March and over 3,500 in April. Statistics Estonia and the Ministry of Finance currently share one computer server and therefore the blog visits monitoring application does not enable us to distinguish between our own staff's blog visits from Statistics Estonia's server and the external visits of real users. We intend to produce a more detailed analysis after the blog has been in use for at least half a year. Then we can give estimates about the number of visitors, and specify which keywords people tend to enter in the search engine to find our blog. We can also spot the most popular areas of statistics, find out how often and where our blog posts have been referred to, analyse the effect of marketing measures taken for promotional purposes, and in view of all the afore-listed activities — make plans for the future.

C. Information on the 2011 Population and Housing Census on Twitter
(<http://twitter.com/REL2011>)

25. While talking about internet marketing, it is often pointed out that the high tide of blogs is over and longer blog posts do not attract attention anymore. The position of blogs has been displaced by the microblog Twitter where the 140-character limit on message length has been set for the information forwarded. In Estonia, Twitter is the least used social media channel compared with Facebook and blogs. According to the estimates provided by internet marketing experts, 6% of the Estonian population will use Twitter in 2010. The result gained after recalculating this percentage into absolute figures shows that even the least-used social media channel in Estonia has currently got about 80,000 users.

26. Statistics Estonia started to use Twitter during the preparations for the pilot Census of the Population and Housing Census in order to disseminate Census-related information. Our PR Project Manager is the editor of this channel and keeps track of the Twitter. Currently, people can find the Census-related information on Estonia and other countries as well as links to population-related and social topics on Twitter. We track tweets and retweets.

27. We have not decided yet what to do with our account on Twitter after the Census is finished. The Census results for Estonia and other EU countries will be published in 2012. The current observers of our account will certainly be interested in keeping track of this information, too. After that we will have time to decide what to do with the Twitter account.

IV. CONCLUSION

28. Statistics Estonia has used the social media for only a short time and therefore we cannot yet declare it a success. But we have already had some achievements worth mentioning — some of our blog posts have been pointed out in online news and on radio, mentioned by news agencies and the printed media, blogosphere and social media. In 1st quarter 2010 compared with the same time a year ago, the number of media reflections has increased by one third. This definitely gives our own specialists a chance to write statistical analyses to the public and build their image, step by step, as opinion leaders. With respect to our Twitter account, it can be noted that there are numerous decision-makers and public opinion leaders among its followers, and we have noticed that they use the information available on our Twitter account from time to time. Our Facebook account is also being visited and the fan club includes our own employees, too.

29. However, dealing with the social media (adding news, blog writing, replies to comments) is a time- and resource-consuming activity. Currently, Statistics Estonia's employees in charge of communication and statisticians do it apart from their basic day-to-day work and hence our social media-related work largely depends on their devotion and enthusiasm.

30. It is equally important to find out through which means of communication users of statistics who constitute our target audience seek statistical information. Statistics Estonia's website with the statistical database, news releases, etc., meets the needs of users at large. At the same time, social media provides an opportunity to improve outreach, dissemination and use of official statistics. And this really is an important target for a statistical office. Statistical offices know perfectly well that the development of official statistics depends on the statistical literacy of its society. But we must work hard to attract the attention of customers and to do that we have to identify and reach the places where our prospective fans gather. Therefore, Statistics Estonia suggests that other statistical offices should definitely try their hand at social media channels, especially in the countries where use of social media is popular.