**UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

UNECE Work Session on the Communication of Statistics
(30 June – 2 July 2010, Paris, France)

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

PANEL DISCUSSION ON NEW EXPERIMENTS

New media seems to be everywhere - Twitter, Facebook, blogs. Statistical organizations are moving with the times to disseminate their information in many new ways. This panel will present several different experiments with new media and provide an opportunity to discuss those projects and others that people in the audience would like to share.

PANEL MEMBERS

- Michael Levi, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

- Judy Moester, Corien Oms and Paul Bransz, Netherlands

- Anu Ots, Estonia

- Verena Hirsch, Switzerland

- Simon Rogers, UK Guardian

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WEB CHATS AT THE U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS: A (VERY) PRELIMINARY REPORT

Submitted by Bureau of Labor Statistics, USA[1]

1. Overview

Web chat is a system that allows Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) subject matter experts to communicate with data users in real time through their Web browser. Users pose questions; BLS staff answer the questions as quickly as they can. Each question and its corresponding answer is posted to the BLS Web site together on a flow basis.

Web chat was deployed as an experiment to assess whether this channel could help us better inform the public about economic statistics and interact with a large number of data users relatively easily and cheaply.

BLS has conducted three Web chats to date, in conjunction with the April, May, and June release of national employment and unemployment data (the Employment Situation report.) The first and third chats were held the morning of the release, the second a few days after the release.

BLS installed CoveritLive software to manage the chat sessions.

2. Preparation

BLS staff conducted three internal practice sessions before going live. This was about right for becoming familiar and comfortable with the system and developing a rhythm for allocating questions to different subject matter experts and posting replies smoothly.

All chats were announced through a banner notice on the BLS home page a few days before the session as well as with an announcement e-mailed to subscribers to the Employment Situation news release. The first chat was also the subject of a box note in the Employment Situation news release. Not long after the e-mails went out, the blogosphere reposted the announcements.

3. Results

We received more questions than we could answer in the hour allotted. More questions addressed methodology than data. We received fewer wild rants and complaints than we had feared. We did receive questions that were out of scope ("How can I find a job?", "Will the unemployment rate start going down now?") but, again, not as many as we had feared.

Web chat metrics

Date	Number of viewers	Number of replays	Questions submitted via chat	Questions e-mailed in Advance	Total questions answered
April 2	1464	1624	140	52	57
May 11	204	140	66	38	39
June 4	167	NA	35	10	34

Most of the feedback we received during the chat was positive:

"These are all GREAT questions and answers. In a thousand years, I could never have found some of the tables/documentation you are referring to in your answers. Thanks again!!!"

"thank you for putting on this chat. it has been incredibly informative and candid."

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4.   What Next?

As can be seen from the metrics table above, the Web chats appear to be running out of steam. We are currently assessing whether and how we should continue. One idea is to vary the subject areas, possibly focusing on special topics (e.g. veterans) rather than standard data releases.

5.   LESSONS LEARNED

Sufficient practice ahead of time is essential.

The mechanics of setting up and running the chat are fairly easy. The human resource demands, however, are not negligible: a moderator, several subject matter experts, an editor, and a LAN technician.

Having a skilled editor review all responses before posting them is not excessively cumbersome and adds polish to the presentation.

Having text that addresses common questions prepared beforehand is helpful, but most of the text needs at least a little work to make the answer responsive to the actual question asked.

Posting a disclaimer in the opening that we will not answer policy questions will not stop people from sending them in, but makes it easier to address once and then move on.

It is important that the questions being answered are actually coming from the public, not staged from inside the agency (a cautionary tale can be seen at FEMA fake news conference.) To ensure this, the BLS deputy commissioner sent out an all-employee e-mail requesting BLS staff to refrain from submitting questions to the chat.

6.   Transcripts

BLS archives transcripts of all chats on our Web site. The first three can be found at:
http://www.bls.gov/chat/archive/2010/empsit_20100402.htm
http://www.bls.gov/chat/archive/2010/empsit_20100511.htm
http://www.bls.gov/chat/archive/2010/empsit_20100604.htm

HOW TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN STATISTICS

Submitted by Statistics Netherlands[2]

We would like to share our efforts on how to interest students and young people in statistics. We have involved students in developing new concepts for visualizing our data on the website. We have developed You Tube movies explaining economic concepts. We Twitter (we send out daily tweets) and we have developed an iPhone application so that our statistical database is available on the iPhone.

1.   Why our experiment is important for communicating statistics?

We try to reach out to young people and other new target groups by using modern-day media. We also think that the image of our company will be more modern and innovative. Another reason for this experiment is to support our educational system.

2.   What's new about it/ how is it different from other communication methods?

The biggest difference is that it does not only use our own website to disseminate our data.

3.   How does it work?

Twitter: every day of the week a twitter message is sent out to the public, mostly referring to new articles on our website. The website editors are responsible for coming up with the tweets.

You Tube: with the help of students, website editors, communication staff and statistical departments, we come up with new content and develop the movies. All very low key.

iPhone: with the help of our technical department we have developed an application so that users can look into our main database on their iPhone.

3D visualization: in our search for new presentation forms we came up with the idea to involve students. A class of 48 students and their teachers spent 10 weeks developing a new 3D concept based on two multi variable data sets.

4.   What are the pros and cons?

Pros: we hope to reach a different audience with the new media. We think our image will be modernized and less stuffy. It is a very cheap way of developing new products.

Cons: the process is not very stable. We rely on efforts from people who are not always available when we need them. We do not have a strategy. It could be that some of the products could even harm our image. For instance, users may not think the new media fit our image of being independent and reliable. Also you invite users to comment on different internet panels. If the public comments in a negative way on these panels, it will be hard for us to do something against it. So far we have been lucky that this has not happened.

5.   Anything unexpected about this new experiment?

- The enthusiasm that is spreading through our company.

- Since the work is done with people from all different departments, it has strengthened the bond between the different departments.

- Working with students has taught us so much about this target group.

6.   What are the lessons learned?

- Don't listen to the negative murmurs within the company.

- Atart low key. Don't start with an official project.

7.   How did you measure if this experiment was a success?

We think this is the hard part. We do not really know when our experiments are a success. We see that more and more people who are visiting our website are coming from twitter.

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[2] Prepared by Paul Bransz (pbrz@cbs.nl), Judy Moester (j.moester@cbs.nl) and Corien Ooms (c.ooms@cbs.nl).

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

Submitted by Statistics Estonia[3]

The future of statistical organisations 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 with a wide range of people interested in statistics. The use of social media shows a growing trend in Estonia, and it is gaining popularity in marketing and communication. A lot of Estonian organisations and businesses have, in search of clients and potential customers, made their way to social networks. To disseminate and promote 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.

In using social media 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 participating 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.

For Statistics Estonia, the use of social media is a question of image among its own employees as well as the wider public. We hope that the use of social media alters the formal and conservative identity of Statistics Estonia and makes society see it as a more innovative, friendly and open organisation.

Statistics Estonia on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/Statistikaamet). Estonia has a population of 1.34 million. The use of Facebook shows a growing trend. According to the projections made by the Estonian internet marketing experts, this number on Facebook users in Estonia will grow to 400,000 by the end of the year. This is a significant target audience to reach.

Using Facebook 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, other Baltic Republics and Eurostat broadens the horizons of our own employees and hopefully of everyone interested in statistics. Currently there are more than 150 fans of our site, and the number of page views per week is about 500. From the perspective of image formation, we feel happy that Statistics Estonia's site has numerous fans from among our own personnel. 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.

Statistics blog (http://statistikaamet.wordpress.com). As the number of printed publications is 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 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 to communicate statistics — and this, indeed, constitutes one of Statistics Estonia's strategic goals.

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. Since January there have been more than 10 000 visits, which we consider a good result.

Statisticians are involved as blog authors. They write the analyses displayed on the blog apart from their basic job and most often at the blog editor's request. So far, the circle of blog authors consists of about ten persons including the Director General.

Information on the 2011 Population and Housing Census on Twitter (http://twitter.com/REL2011). 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% (80,000 persons) of the Estonian population are using Twitter in 2010. 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. Currently, people can find the Census-related information on Estonia and other countries as well as links

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[3] Anu Ots, Communications Chief of Statistics Estonia (Anu.ots@stat.ee).

to population-related and social topics on Twitter. Our PR Project Manager is the editor of this channel and keeps track of the Twitter. There are nearly 300 followers of REL2011 Twitter.

To let users know about these new information channels (Twitter and Facebook accounts, statistics blog), 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.

Statistics Estonia has used the social media for quite 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.

However, dealing with the social media (adding news, writing blog posts, 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. We have no employee specially appointed to be in charge of social media-related work only. Statisticians write the analyses displayed on the blog apart from their basic job.

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. If we wish to attract the attention of customers 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.

CROWDSOURCING: IS IT JOURNALISM OR DATA-GATHERING?

Submitted by the Guardian Datablog and Datastore, United Kingdom[4]

What is crowdsourcing?

Using the power of the millions of users out there on the web to investigate large collections of source documents and data. At the Guardian, we have conducted a number of experiments in this area, with varying success. Here are three of the main ones.

MPs' expenses (http://mps-expenses.guardian.co.uk/)

The most ambitious attempt. When the House of Commons first agreed to release details of members of Parliament expenses claims, it caused a storm – especially when the receipts for every MP were leaked to a rival newspaper. The House of Commons bought the release of the documents forward because of the political storm. But how does a news organization go through 450,000 receipts and claim forms in one day?

We decided to enlist our readers to help and the result?

The site enabled readers to do two things:

1) View the documents in an easily accessible way – in the end, a much simpler way than the Parliamentary authorities allowed;
2) Highlight interesting receipts, comment on them and itemise amounts spent

It enabled our news desk to do two things:

1) Navigate around the documents more easily
2) See which had been highlighted by our readers, pick up stories and conduct analysis of the data

A million people used it, it highlighted stories for our reporters and helped make readers feel involved in the biggest political story of the moment. As a source of data, it was less successful – so we simplified it at the next data release: http://mps-expenses2.guardian.co.uk/

Here we asked our readers for less, pointing the way forward for this approach.

Iran's missing (http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2009/jun/29/iran-dead-detained-faces)

Thousands have been arrested in Iran since the election. Working with human rights and campaign groups such as Human Rights Watch, the Campaign for Human Rights in Iran and Reporters Without Borders we wanted to collate a list of the names of the dead or detained.

Using their lists of names as a starting point, we asked readers and those elsewhere on the internet to contribute too. Since we launched this exercise we have had hundreds of emails, photographs and names sent to us.

All information was assessed and verified as much as possible before publication and we both visualised as an interactive graphic and making it available as a spreadsheet, via our Datablog (http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/jan/28/iran-dead-detained-protests-elections-spreadsheet)

The COINS database (http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/jun/04/coins-database-search)

Coins is one of the largest databases in UK government, detailing millions of individual spending items by government departments. The new government was committed to publishing the database in full (requests had always been denied by the Treasury in the past) and duly did so soon after election. The government published each year's data as separate downloadable CSV and bit-torrent files.

We wanted to get inside Coins – see what it could tell us about government spending (and cuts) and work out how to use it. As well as generate news stories from the data.

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[4] Prepared by Simon Rogers (simon.rogers@guardian.co.uk).

In an unprecedented operation, we brought in a team of like-minded developers and datajournalists from organisations like Where Does My Money Go? (http://coins.wheredoesmymoneygo.org/), Rewired State (http://rewiredstate.org/) and MySociety (http://www.mysociety.org/) to help us analyse the data and break it down. Our first task was to make the data accessible. So our developers built the Coins explorer – a way to help users navigate around the data.

Using our Coins explorer, our reporters and readers could filter the millions of lines of data by year, government department, type of spending and so on.

The result was a number of stories in the Guardian and the easiest to use way of getting around Coins on the web. As government cutback start to bite, we think this will help us get to the bottom of what's going on.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/coins-combined-online-information-system