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(iii) Managing communication

JOINT PRESENTATION OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS TO THE MEDIA

Submitted by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Communication is a major priority for the media, for businesses, government institutions, and statistical bodies. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia is investing time and effort in establishing innovative approaches that help us communicate effectively with different audiences. The competition for users stimulates the development of communication itself, and forces statistical institutions to adopt a more professional approach to communication, and embrace the methods of communication agencies.

2. The general public is mainly interested in data which can give valuable information about so-called “real life” and “real people”, and adds to society’s knowledge of them. Good, qualified media aim to cover such topics, often using statistics supplemented by comprehensive and detailed analysis conducted by researchers or other professional analysts.

3. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia does not have sufficient knowledge to offer more sophisticated analysis to the media: the production and coordination of statistics and the communication of key messages with users have a vital role to play. But the media often expect more than the statisticians are able to interpret about a particular phenomenon. This was the reason why the Office decided to present certain data at press conferences in more profound way; i.e. together with research analysts, scientists or policy-makers.

II. OPENNESS OF THE SLOVENIAN STATISTICAL OFFICE

A. Effective communication

4. Statistical institutions develop in tandem with society, the surrounding environment, and the growth of related institutions. Such progress has been made by introducing a new concept - appropriate communication with users is the basis of successful performance. In many cases, the major mission and role of statistical institutions is based on communication. And so, in many aspects, communication upgrades and assists the dissemination of statistics (and in some views replaces it). Thus, instead of simply publishing raw data, the statistical institution establishes an all-embracing communication process, in which groups of users and communication channels are brought together to disseminate statistics.

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5. In distinguishing between communication and dissemination, many definitions and descriptions (which define the range of both activities) are available. However, it is quite clear to us that communicating information is much more than simply disseminating data. It is a process that includes statisticians in an 'active' state, ready to expect feedback from users. As a result, the information from the user regarding the data can be further processed if necessary.

6. In its strict sense the communication process should assume a conversation/dialogue through data between statisticians and users (contrary to communication, dissemination can only spread the data). A dialogue between statisticians and data users reinforces interest in the particular data (statisticians often mistakenly expect that all information is interesting to the general public). Statisticians should use common, spoken, everyday language - the language by which people can discover and understand their real lives - which in turn can be described, reinforced and disclosed through statistics, too.

7. Two premises are essential for statistical bodies if communication is to be effective: firstly, statistics should be interesting to the general public, and secondly, statistics should have accompanying interpretations of data - so that people can understand the value added to the knowledge of their everyday lives. The appropriate question at that point is: should statisticians step off the pedestal of their own statistical environment (pure statistics is based on science) and prepare a sort of "translation" of the data for the media, who are representatives of broad audience, or just offer data with so-called "flat commentaries", assuming people are statistically literate enough to understand the meaning of the data in its wider context?

8. Statistical language is scientific language. Of course, statisticians are able to simplify the results of statistical surveys quite smartly, but often for only one or two particular fields of statistics, without connections to events and developments taking place in society. No doubt, in translation from a more or less scientific language to ordinary, spoken language, something is lost: one could perhaps even say that it is not strictly correct, from a statistician's point of view. Nevertheless, the loss can be replaced by the interpretation of the meaning of data given by academic professionals, expert analysts, or even by a person involved in the process of political decision-making. Statistics are in this way exposed to the judgement of the most demanding users (scientific community) and are used in highly professional analysis when statisticians present them.

B. Media judge official statistics

9. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia organises press conferences on a monthly basis, where the most interesting results of statistical surveys are explained by statisticians. Moreover, last autumn we decided to introduce special press conferences where we used data gathered in many statistical surveys and also invited experts along to give journalists a broader interpretation of the statistics in relation to the circumstances, actual events and developments in society.

10. Special press conferences are usually organised when a publication with wide-ranging and interesting content is released - where the aim is to promote the publication widely. If the content of the publication is in line with public interest at the time (like the new arrangement of the pension system in relation to ageing of the population) or is of concern to almost every human being (climate change), there will be sufficient interest among journalists. However, the learned guests at these press conferences, i.e. academic professors or professional analysts, offer a valuable contribution to more extensive explanations of the data.

11. In less than one year we organised five press conferences on special themes with invited guests. The topics were: ageing of the population as forecast by projections, young people, environmental statistics concerning the changing climate, gender statistics, and sustainable development. Attending the conferences were two academic professors, two professional analysts, the minister for education (on two occasions) and some experts from various research institutions.

12. The interest shown by journalists was considerable. From the size of the subsequent press-clipping reviews, we judged that the Slovenian media supported our decision to offer more than a simplified presentation of statistics.

13. Our first experiences with the joint presentation of official statistics to the media confirm that the Slovenian statistical office should continue with this communication policy. Nevertheless, it is to some extent risky to appear in front of the media accompanied by the experts who might criticize the statistical office or statistics. On the other hand, these challenges can increase the confidence in the statistical office and official statistics, as well.