

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

ECE Work Session on Statistical Output
for Dissemination to Information Media
(Geneva, Switzerland, 28-30 October 2002)

Topic (a): Review of the draft of the “Statistics in the media – handbook on best practices for statistical offices in dealing with the media”.

Suggestion for revised structure of chapter VI¹:

**UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER’S TRADE
-MEDIA TRAINING FOR STATISTICIANS AND OFFICIALS
-STATISTICAL UNDERSTANDING FOR JOURNALIST**

6.1. Introduction

If statisticians are to speak for themselves to the media and a wider public, they must learn how to communicate simply and effectively. They need to have some understanding of how the media operate, what their agenda is and what difficulties they face. Equally, it must help both statisticians and journalists if the media develop some understanding about the work of statisticians.

The media are the quickest and most immediate pathway for statistics to reach the general public. It makes good sense then for national and international statistical institutes to prepare strategies and programmes for how to help their staff deal with the media and for the media to understand better what statisticians are trying to achieve.

This raises important questions: how frequent should any training be; how formal; and how far-reaching? This chapter attempts to look at the issues surrounding media-training. It looks at the various points in favour and possible drawbacks and draws on the experiences of various NSIs that have training programmes in place. From these common and best practices NSIs can prepare their own programmes to suit their needs, their budgets and their media. The full version of the chapter also includes some examples of how some statistical institutes have directly attempted to educate the public and in particular children in secondary schools.

6.2 Summary of main points

- The media are the quickest pathway to the public – it makes sense to train both statisticians and journalists to understand each other better.

¹ Prepared by David Marder

- NSIs need to decide what options best suit them from the various techniques available – how formal, how frequent, how far-reaching?
- Training our own staff in the ways of the media is more straightforward because it can be made a job-specific requirement. Persuading journalists to be interested in statistics is far less easy.
- Any media-training programme must be an integral part of an NSI's media-relations strategy. Senior managers must also agree to it with total commitment.
- Media-training must be valued within an NSI – it must want to improve its media-relations skills.
- There must be a clear picture of what media-training can and can not achieve.
- Statistical officers need a fundamental understanding that they do their work for the benefit of the general public and not for the interest of their statistical peers.
- Statisticians need to be made more aware of the context in which they release their data – how will they impact on other issues, news and events?
- Statisticians need to realise journalists are more interested in results than the processes to achieve them – to journalists impact carries more weight than quality.
- When setting up training programmes, NSIs should make sure they are active, flexible and properly evaluated.
- Who does the training? Press office staff? Invited journalists? Training agencies?
- Helping journalists understand statistics requires building their trust in our honesty and integrity.
- To get journalists to invest their time in learning more about statistics we need to show them 'what's in it for them'.
- Teach them the six steps to discern probable facts from probable trash.
- Don't rely on public education to have given journalists sufficient understanding of statistics and their interpretation.
- Make maximum use of the interactive power of the web to encourage understanding and interpretation of statistics – make it fun!

6.3 Techniques and approaches – plus points and minus points

6.3.1 This section looks in tabular form at what maybe achieved from adopting certain ideas in training of statistical staff and also where the ideas may be lacking:

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
Basic media-relations course – up to one day, mainly lecture and simple news release writing exercises to improve standard of output to the media.	Gives staff a grounding in what the media does; what it is trying to achieve; what are the main pitfalls in dealing with the media. Helps give staff confidence in speaking to the media and an understanding of how they write differently.	Depending on the time available and frequency of the course, can only give a superficial overview of the media. Often doesn't have time to go into depth for interview techniques, radio or TV training. This is the minimum any staff member should have done before being allowed to speak directly to the media.
Advanced media-relations course – one or two days with interview techniques and exercises; dealing with a hostile questioner; possibly time for some radio or TV technique; talk from a journalist or a visit to a newsroom.	An important next step for staff who may need to deal more regularly with the media. Increasing confidence, understanding and relationships with the media and press office. Learn how to be in control of an interview. How to avoid panic and being stampeded into ill-considered or just wrong responses.	Still needs to be repeated to maintain staff members' skills. Needs a lot of active input to maintain its effectiveness. Costs begin to rise as people and visits from outside the organisation are employed.
Radio interview technique training using experienced contractors. Usually a day either on-site or at a suitable training studio.	Gives staff the confidence to talk about their subject on air. Good trainers will also ensure statisticians understand the importance of identifying the key message and sticking to it. Helps the statistician learn clarity, simplicity and brevity. Helps learn the importance of 'the soundbite'.	Can be expensive and needs refresher courses to keep up skill level. Only a small number of people can be catered for in any one session.
TV interview technique training using experienced contractors. Usually a day either on-site or at a suitable studio.	Encourages further refinement of communication technique and encourages statistician to consider how to be visual in what they present. TV is probably the harshest of all communication environments.	Can be expensive and needs refresher courses to keep up skill level. Only a small number of people can be catered for in any one session. Is usually only required by a very few members of staff.
Writing for the media	Helps statisticians	There is a natural

course – using an experienced media writer to improve writing techniques of report writers.	understand there is more than one way to write. How should they present their report in the best way to be interesting to the media and public at large rather than a select band of other statisticians and academics.	resistance in people to being told how to do something as fundamental as writing. Can seem very subjective – the credibility of the trainer is crucial. Needs a culture change in the NSI.
Published checklist for preparation of news releases	Simple and cheap to produce. It provides a clear guideline of what is expected in preparing a news release.	It is prescriptive and needs to be couple with some training as above before the statistician understands the reasoning behind the checklist.
Seminars and ‘brown bag lunches’ – where staff involved in briefing the media have the opportunity to refresh and renew their skills.	Very important for feedback sessions. Informal and interactive these are relatively cheap, can cover a lot of people and help greatly with networking.	Need to be frequent. Need strong backing from senior management to ensure they are attended and provide useful feedback. Danger of just being a talking shop.
Exchange visits – where statisticians visit a newsroom and see how it works while a journalist comes to a statistical office.	Engenders an understanding in an individual of what it is like ‘on the other side’.	Hard to arrange and of limited scope.
Tailored courses and advice – where training is given on how to deal with a specific issue or how to deal with a particular high profile release to maximise coverage	Very specific to the data being put out and helps focus very clearly on the message to be given to the media. Easy to evaluate.	A narrow view which may not be transferable to other areas of work and which may be outside the NSI’s overall media-relations policy.
Workshops for journalists – where media representatives are invited in for a formal seminar and workshop on specific statistical subjects.	Helps journalists to understand a particular subject area and write better about it understanding the statisticians’ difficulty in arriving at certain figures	Hard to interest journalists unless there is a real news story at the end of it. Statistics in general seen as too boring by journalists.
Factsheets and “idiots’ guides” – written in simple, clear and concise style these explain to journalists how they should understand and interpret statistics	Something a journalist can have at his or deskside or in a pocket to help them evaluate the worth of report being put before them. Can be provided in web, calendar, diary or poster form.	Passive and has no interaction. Gains little common understanding between the journalist and the statistician.

Individual tutoring for journalists – where a statistician gives up time to go through a particular area of statistical work with a journalists and explain all the meanings and interpretations.	Excellent for getting a detailed picture across and easy to measure the results.	Time-consuming and only covers an individual; so should be used sparingly and for journalists who deal in special areas.
Chargeable courses – where an NSI arranges and advertises a formal course through media umbrella groups and unions to provide training on specific or general statistical subjects	Guaranteed audience, motivated to pay attention. Get the message across without having to provide a news-angle.	Requires journalists' training budget holders to recognise the value and importance of their staff being strained to understand and interpret statistics.
Handbooks and brochures both printed and on the web – as part of a more general education theme providing valuable background information about how to understand and interpret statistics	Can be provided and used in conjunction with other communications programmes. Use the power and accessibility of the web.	Passive and requires the user to find it and try to understand it.
Interactive web pages – where journalists and the public are encourage “to have fun with statistics” and try out various statistical methods.	Fun to do and uses the interactive power of the web. Learning through games.	Passive and possibly vulnerable to the accusation of trivialisation. Needs careful planning. Open only to those with access to the web. Not yet been tried by a NSI.