Chapter VII: Use and support of the news media in promotion of key statistical releases, national censuses and other surveys

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7. (GOOD AND ILL TEMPERS OF THE MEDIA) Use and support of the news media in promotion of key statistical releases, national censuses and other surveys

7.1 Introduction

News media never will provide a taciturn or neutral vehicle of dissemination. When the greatest ventures of statistics like census are to be carried out, media can be helpful with reservations restrained, may give effective assistance to promotion of greatest surveys. Effectiveness of the work group can be followed on one of the after census examples, when even an international club of statisticians and users were founded. But beyond friendly contacts there will be always misunderstandings. Apparently to reconcile rationalism of statistics with alleged sensationalism of news media seems to be as hard to reconcile as fire and ice. Dealing with negative press coverage of different statistical agencies could provide useful cases of conciliation. A considerable room for manoeuvre of data producers always remains and a sort of **reciprocal relationship could be established**. This assumes earliest possible detection of the nature of criticism expressed by the news media, realization of whether it stems from mistake, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, mischief or misuse of statistics. Each of them requires special treatment and possibly involves the top management. And when a crisis breaks out it is better to follow certain patterns instead of panic.

7.1.2 GENERATING MOTIVATION OF THE MEDIA

National statistical offices have an important responsibility to collect, analyze, and disseminate quality data to a variety of audiences. **Data is the product** by which these **organizations are judged**, and thus the collection of data is perhaps their most important function. Without quality data collection, no quality analyses or dissemination can follow. Credibility of both data released and organizations responsible for them may be improved through news media, which when get inclined to, will provide due reports about events of public interest.

But then opportunities will occur when a kind of hostility might be felt from the news media. Several **data could be contested**, suspicions expressed about manipulations. As always in such cases, one can be wondering: who and why put awkward questions? The answer depends again on **communication environment**. One can suspect that very newspaper and most other media outlets have their own agenda and reports and headlines are written to that agenda. One could even claim that the media are partisan and **separation of facts from opinion**, in fact, rarely exists. Moreover, when searching motives one may assume that in a desperate quest for stories **journalists combine journalistic licence** – the massaging of facts to capture and hold attention – **with gross over-simplification**, selection (discarding of inconvenient qualifications), interpretation (a sort of 'heroic' deduction), and, of course, sensationalism, prejudice and opinion. The whole thing adds up to commercialism in a world of intense commercial rivalry.

Or, when nerves are lost, assertion might come: The media turn 'speculation' into an art form – what really sounds as a reverse side of accusations in statistical manipulation. Moreover, one can suppose that journalists will use non-attributable (secret) sources and mischief-making gossips (all with their own particular agenda) to publish a story that fits their own preconceptions. The offended party will have forebodings that the media frequently rush to judgment ignoring their duty to balance and responsibility and are so often consumed with dubious conspiracy theories, they are reluctant to see anything at face value or even the simple truth.

And one could conclude that it is worth remembering in any strategy to gain a smoother ride in the press that journalism in NOT 'a search for truth and beauty'. One of the disadvantages of having a "free press" is that the media are free to be wrong. Like **statistics with its omissions and data revisions** – could answer whatever journalist.

If such desperate thoughts are rare it proves that the National Statistical Office was able to find ways how to co-operate with the news media. Moreover, they can make use of guide for cases when a real crisis arises without the smallest intervention of the mediators.

7.2 News media in promotion of censuses and surveys

In order to obtain quality data, there must be public confidence in the statistical surveys, which National Statistical Offices use to collect their information. The news media play an important role in gaining and maintaining the public's confidence.
The **news media**, in using data, often directly or indirectly **puts a stamp of credibility** on the source behind the data. When **individuals are recruited** for participating in a survey, they are more likely to **be familiar with a survey** if data from that survey has been cited in the news media.
Potential participants in the survey will have a **greater degree of confidence** that the survey is legitimate if data from the survey has been cited in the media, and this helps data collectors overcome such barriers as the fear of infringement upon personal privacy. This publicity can also assure respondents that the survey is legitimate and counter fear of "scams" while fostering a more open and receptive environment for the subsequent contacts by interviewers.
Media publicity is also potentially beneficial by illustrating to a mass audience the usefulness of the data and thus encouraging participation in an effort that has a benefit for the country.

7.2.1 The U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) is one of the most ***unique*** *of all U.S. health surveys. It is conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, within the Department of Health and Human Services.*
The survey relies not only on health interviews but also on actual physical examinations to collect data. A staff of trained health professionals travels around the U.S. in ***mobile examination centers****, collecting this information. This survey has been conducted several times since the early 1960's, and over the years has produced national estimates on how many Americans have hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol, HIV, Hepatitis, Diabetes, and host of other conditions. Data from NHANES was also used to create the U.S. growth charts. Nutritional data from NHANES provides great detail on the type of diet most Americans have.*
NHANES is conducted in a number of ***diverse*** *American* ***communities****, large and small, urban and rural, and the survey staff face different challenges in trying to recruit participants, depending on the community.* ***The local news media*** *in each community play an important* ***role in alerting*** *its citizens that the survey will be coming to the area, and also in educating them about what the survey entails. The* ***national news media also contributes*** *as a backdrop by reporting the major data findings from the survey, bolstering credibility.*

Developing a local media strategy
Developing a local media strategy for each community or "stand" is **a long-term process**, which is usually dependent upon the size and demographics of that particular stand. Several preliminary steps must be taken before beginning outreach to the media:
- **Identifying local newspapers**, fliers, and radio and TV outlets,
- Preparing **media materials**, such as press releases, questions and answers, information packet, and a video news release *(Show VNR)*,
- Contacting news and outlets **in advance informing** them about when the survey will be arriving in the community,

Preparing Local Media Materials
A **standard press release** was developed to provide information about the survey to local media. This press release will be **modified** as necessary **as the survey travels** from community to community.

A list of likely or potential **questions and answers** was developed, to help survey staff prepare for the possibility of local media interviews. These questions and answers will help give staff the opportunity to influence potential survey participants through the news media. The survey contains a number of potentially sensitive areas such as testing for HIV/AIDS, and questions on sexual activity and drug use. For each survey location, a single staff member has the primary responsibility of dealing with the media and this person receives media training as necessary.
A general information packet was put together for potential survey participants, and this includes press clippings from **news stories using data from the survey**. This allows participants to make the connection between the data collection aspect they are being asked to partake in and the end result, which is comprehensive health data for the nation.
Television is the number one source of news for most Americans. Thus, a video news release (VNR) was prepared for survey staff to give to television affiliate stations across the country. The VNR consists of two parts: a two-minute narrated news segment and 10 minutes of raw footage or “B-Roll” of the inside of simulated exams inside the examination centers. The B-Roll is expected to be highly useful to stations, which wouldn’t be able to get this footage otherwise *(see VNR)*.

Outreach to the local media
Once the media materials have been prepared, the outreach to the local media begins. Survey staff will contact print and broadcast news outlets via phone, and fax or mail them materials and offer to hold more in-depth interviews.

Developing a national media strategy
A national media strategy is most often geared around a **specific event** or the release of new information. For the purposes of increasing public awareness about the survey, the “event” was the actual kickoff of the survey. This gave public affairs staff an opportunity to announce the survey was going into the field. Several **preliminary steps** must be taken before beginning outreach to the media:
- **Updating** national **media lists** for newspapers, journals, magazines, radio, and television,
- Preparing **media materials**, such as press releases, questions and answers, and a video news release,
- **Contacting news outlets** in advance and embargoing them the information about the survey,

Preparing national media materials
A **standard press release** was developed to provide information about the survey that will have more of an appeal to the national media. This is a **single, one-time effort**, and the press release was designed to highlight some of the prominent findings the survey has uncovered in the past.
A list of likely or potential questions and answers is developed, to help public affairs staff prepare for the possibility of media interviews or even media tours of the examination facilities.
Though national television networks in the U.S. generally don’t utilize VNRs, they are interested in obtaining footage that is unavailable elsewhere, and the B-Roll footage of the exam center interior is an example of rare footage that is unique. Broadcasting the VNR **via satellite** is another strategy to reach out to the television affiliates in the field.

Results
Media coverage can be tracked in a number of different ways. Though the national press release for the March 15 survey kickoff did not result in much media coverage initially, one was able to schedule several **independent media tours** for reporters. As a result of these tours, feature articles about NHANES were eventually published.

In terms of survey participation, the survey has had 85 percent participation rate in the initial household interview and a 75% participation rate in the examination component. These response rates are considered excellent for a survey, which involves both an in-home interview of an hour or more and a subsequent physical examination of up to four hours. In addition, local and national publicity has helped to **minimize adverse publicity** or negative community reaction. Thus, media coverage is an integral part of the operation of this and other surveys of the National Center for Health Statistics.

7.2.2 The Canadian Census of Population

The Canadian Census of Population is conducted every five years, most recently in 1996. It is a complex operation, collecting data from the over 11 million households in Canada. Its success depends greatly on public cooperation – 85 percent of questionnaires are mailed back within the first ten days after Census Day.
To ensure this high level of cooperation the 1996 Census Communications program had four components to generate public awareness: media relations; paid advertising; education and a support program. All contributed to the success of the Census.

Policy Framework
*The **relationship** between Statistics Canada and media institutions is a **reciprocal** one: the media need Statistics Canada information to report social and economic trends in Canadian society. Statistics Canada relies on media coverage to inform the public of the results of its numerous surveys and related programs, and in the case of the Census, of the actual census taking. Because of this ongoing relationship policies have been developed to guide this relationship: the policy on spokespersons and media relations and the policy on responses to erroneous statements in the media.*
The first policy notes that Statistics Canada is a professional, objective agency engaged in information dissemination and therefore normally accedes to media requests for interviews and to provide comments on program issues and data interpretation.
*The second policy provides that **response** shall be made **promptly to erroneous information** about Statistics Canada, its products or services, misinterpretation of data or misleading statements in the media. In the context of Census data collection, this means that if a specific question becomes contentious, an immediate response is required.*

Media Strategy
The focus of the media strategy was to use the media provide information to all Canadians on the "5 W's" – who, what, when, where, why. Census Communications generated much of its media coverage through proactive media activities, which were carried out in April and early May 1996.

Activities
*Activities included news releases, press kits, phone calls to pre-arrange interviews, media tours, census stock video footage, and editorial board meetings. The responsibility for media relations' activities was divided among the regions and headquarters. Each **regional office** was responsible for **planning its own media activities** while headquarters carried out national activities (located in Ottawa).*

News Releases
Three national releases were prepared:
April 17, 1996 The 1996 Census of Canada
May 14, 1996 Today is Census Day in Canada
May 17, 1996 It's Not too Late to Count Yourself In
Although news releases were primarily targeted at the national media, they were also sent to local media in the National Capital Region. Regional offices received copies for distribution to their local media.
*The first release was the first official announcement of the upcoming Census. By making the announcement closer to Census Day, the release directed journalists' energy to the general collection and operations processes and **detracted some attention** from the **"content, confidentiality and cost" issues**, thereby engendering a more informative and neutral coverage.*
The second release, Today is Census Day in Canada, focused on the purpose of the Census and the confidentiality of personal information
The third release, three days after Census Day, focused on thanking the millions of Canadians who had already returned completed forms and reminded those who hadn't, that it wasn't too late.
*In addition to the national releases, regional offices prepared releases. **Feature articles were prepared** for weekly community newspapers focusing on issues of local interest.*

Census Media Kits
Media kits were sent to national print media at the same time as the first news release. A four-page media bulletin/newsletter provided general information about the census - new questions, costs, confidentiality, etc. This bulletin/newsletter worked well, it provided the media with information to prepare articles and interviews. **Kits for the electronic media** were also assembled and distributed.

Media Interviews
In the first two weeks of May, phone calls were made to national and local media to determine their interest in the census as a news topic. Many of these phone calls generated interest for taped interviews, many of which were conducted in the week prior to Census Day.
When media enquiries about the 1996 Census dealt with national, specific content or collection topics, **subject matter analysts** or official **spokespersons** usually **handled the interviews**. When the questions dealt with regional issues, regional communications officers arranged for a census official in their area to provide the interview.
This approach to media enquiries worked well both to generate coverage and to check negative coverage before it became a problem.

Census Stock Footage
Two five-minute videos (one targeted to Francophone media, the other to Anglophone media) were prepared featuring stock footage related to various aspects of the census. A **variety of sequences** were used, including a Census Help Line scene, a Census Representative dropping off a questionnaire, hands flipping through a census questionnaire and a woman answering enquiries in a regional reference center.
After potentially interested media had been identified, 100 copies were distributed across the country. Stock footage was prepared in standard electronic format (Betacam), with cut-aways, close-ups, action shots, etc.

Editorial Board Meetings
Editorial Board Meetings were held with five national/major regional media in April 1996. The Assistant Chief Statistician or the 1996 Census Manager met with the editorial staff to **respond to questions about the content and conduct** of the **Census**. These meetings proved to be an opportune time to explain the significance of the new race/ population group question, and to respond to other issues. In addition to sensitizing editorial staff to census issues, the meetings also generated media coverage.

Media Events
While there were **no national media events, regions organized** different **events** to draw attention to the upcoming Census. For example, in the Atlantic region, kick-off events were organized in a number of cities on May 6, the first day of drop-off, which involved the mayor as well as Census staff. These were successful in that there was an earlier, high mail response rate. In other regions media tours by senior regional Census staff (e.g. Regional Director) in areas outside major cities were used for outreach.

Media Analysis
Print and electronic media **coverage was tracked** daily beginning January 1996. The 1996 Census generated an enormous amount of media coverage – over 2500 clippings. The largest proportion of census media coverage appeared during the two weeks prior to Census Day and for the most part, was factual. As Census Day moved closer, the media generally focused on collection questions and **coverage** was mainly **neutral** in tone and **informative** in nature.
Regardless of the topic or issue, media coverage of the 1996 Census for the three weeks prior to May 14 ensured that most people were indeed aware that the national survey was being conducted.

Issues Management
Ideally any potentially **contentious issues are identified well before the Census** and all necessary materials and processes to deal with these are in place, to allay any public concerns about the Census. The major tools used were the identification of spokespersons, provision of media training, and the preparation of questions and answers. As well, an opinion/editorial was prepared to explain the new race/population group question.

Spokespersons
In the Census context, the **Assistant Chief Statistician** and the 1996 **Census Manager** were the official spokespersons on cross-cutting issues, while subject matter experts and regional directors were identified and trained to provide information related to their area of expertise, using the Questions and Answers (see below).
In October 1995, senior Census staff was provided with instructions on handling media inquiries and copies of the policy on spokespersons and media relations. This helped to ensure that only people who had been trained and who knew the "official line" would talk to the media. Census staff was also told **to refer all enquiries** to the media **hot line**.

Questions and Answers
Issues that could generate media interest **were identified** in the spring of 1995. Initial questions and answers were developed and subject matter experts trained prior to the official publication of the Census questions. Although the **media had little interest** in the Census questions **at the time they were first published**, interest picked up during the fall and winter and a number of articles on the race/population group question appeared. 1996 was the first time a race/population group question was included in the Census.
A complete set of questions and answers was prepared between October 1995 and March 1996. Although work on the most controversial issues was started early, the final approval took considerable time. Consequently, regional offices and media relations staff did not always have the final approved "departmental responses" if issues were raised early by the media.
The concept of "departmental responses" worked very well. The majority of **coverage** generated by the Census **was factual** and did not take either a negative or positive slant. Nevertheless, shortly after the questions had been approved by Cabinet and made public, the concept of a "race" question on the census became contentious with an article in a major English newspaper. This became the first of many articles over the next 10 months on this topic.

Opinion-Editorial Article
Negative media coverage of the race/population group question prior to the Census prompted the Agency to prepare an opinion-editorial article signed by the Chief Statistician. The article outlined the raison-d'être of the race question and attempted to clarify any misconceptions already in the public domain.
The letter was distributed to daily newspapers in Ottawa and Toronto during editorial board meetings. Copies were also provided to regional offices for distribution to their papers if necessary to contain negative coverage. This distribution proved to be an effective method of responding to public criticism of the question. The opinion-editorial appeared in over 11 papers.

7.2.3 Using the News Media to Promote Census 2000 at the U.S. Census Bureau

The Census 2000 ***Partnership and Marketing Program*** *was designed to remind and educate the public about the upcoming census and to motivate them to return their census forms. By combining awareness, promotion and outreach activities, the program hoped to increase response rates, especially among the historically undercounted populations.*
To accomplish these goals, the program had an integrated ***marketing strategy*** *that includes:*
- *A media relations program;*
- *A first time ever paid advertising campaign;*
- *A "census in schools" program contracted to Scholastic, Inc.;*

- *A national and regional partnership program; and*
- *Special events to celebrate this unique national event.*

Media Relations Program

Media relations contributed to the goal of the Census 2000 Partnership and Marketing Program by generating clear, consistent, repeated messages about the importance of participating in the census. Research by the Census Bureau following the 1990 census found a **direct correlation** between **knowledge** that the decennial census was taking place **and participation in the census**. Census Bureau studies showed that various population groups had 15 to 20 percent higher mail-response rates if they had read, heard or seen something about the 1990 census. The fundamental objective for the media relations program then was clear: to help promote positive national visibility for Census 2000.

Support timing

It also was designed to support each major census operation. The media strategy was divided into seven stages:

Stage One: ***Early Preparation*** 04/01/97 to 06/30/99
Stage Two: ***Building Media Partnerships/Pre-Awareness*** 07/01/99 to 12/31/99
Stage Three: ***Building Awareness*** 01/01/00 to 03/15/00
Stage Four: ***Motivating Response/ Call to Action*** 03/16/00 to 04/15/00
Stage Five: ***Motivating Cooperation for Enumerator Visits*** 04/16/00 to 07/31/00
Stage Six: ***Wrap-up and Evaluation*** 08/01/00 to 12/31/00
Stage Seven: ***Data Release and Distribution*** 01/01/01 to 12/31/01

Specific activities, focus and message were tied to each stage. “Early preparation” focused on building and **training staff** both at headquarters and in the regions. During this period, Decennial Media Relations Team began **developing relationships with key reporters**, editors, publishers and broadcast executives.

The primary goal of the “building partnerships/ pre-awareness” stage was to put much higher emphasis on building and solidifying partnerships with the news media to promote and support Census 2000.

Stage five, “motivating cooperation for enumerator visits”, was designed to keep Census 2000 in the news through the remainder of census operations and to **motivate the public** to cooperate with enumerators during nonresponse follow-up.

By law, census counts were to be given to the President of the United States by Dec. 31, 2000. The next critical date was April 1, 2001, when, also by law, the data used for drawing voting districts had to be released. After that, other data from the census were released on a flow basis. The final stage, “data release and distribution,” was the **giveback phase** when the Census Bureau went back to the media.

National Media

Planning the Census 2000 Media Relations Strategy rested primarily with the Public Information Office’s (PIO) Decennial Media Relations Team (DMRT), which was responsible for **creating and maintaining effective media relations** throughout Census 2000. Overall, DMRT responded to media inquiries from the press, issued news releases, held press conferences and media briefings, attended journalism conferences and provided educational materials and drop-in articles to the press.

DMRT was responsible for coordinating outreach and partnership efforts with national news media associations with the end of having them encourage their members to support and promote the census through public interest news coverage and editorial promotion. Through one of its partners, DMRT developed a series of **nationwide workshops** for journalists.

A minority media outreach **effort focused** on establishing relationships with national news media outlets and their associations that **reach the historically undercounted minority populations** – African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Asian and Pacific Islanders. This program provided **targeted materials** for these populations in their native languages.

Regional Media
As in previous decennial censuses, each of 12 regional offices had hired **temporary media specialists** to work with local media outlets in the region. PIO provided technical guidance, training and support to the specialists through periodic conferences, conference calls, decision memoranda, e-mail messages, and 24-hour paging and daily communication. The DMRT provided the regional specialists:
- standard message statements on critical issues;
- drop-in articles that the specialists place locally;
- boilerplate news releases to support census operations;
- stock footage and still photos for media outlets;
- updates on operational information; and
- a style review of regionally produced news releases.

The regional media specialists mirrored the activities of the DMRT at the local level.

Paid Advertising
For the previous five censuses, the Census Bureau had used the *pro bono* services of the Advertising Council to prepare Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to promote the census.
The Ad Council is comprised of key advertising companies who agree to mount ad campaigns for free as a public service. Typically they work on major national, civic-minded campaigns. In 1990, the ads developed by the ad council were impressive. However there were two main concerns:
- A change in regulations allowing television and radio stations to play fewer PSAs resulted in the 1990 census PSAs receiving less airtime. Stations that did air the PSAs tended to do so late in the night.
- The disparity in the PSAs produced made it difficult to recognize that the ads were promoting the same event. To target people of color, the Ad Council subcontracted with four minority advertising companies to develop targeted PSAs for those audiences.

For 2000, the Census Bureau has **entered into contract** with Young and Rubicam (Y & R) for a paid advertising campaign. Y & R has sub-contracted with four firms that do targeted (also known as "niche") marketing. The five firms are committed to a totally integrated approach. The ad buys were focused **on programming that reached the majority of America**; the targeted ads to programming that reached those less likely to respond to the census and particular racial and ethnic groups.

Census in the Schools
The Census in Schools Project, "Making Sense of Census 2000", offered **educators** the opportunity to acquire colorful, high-interest, **appropriate lessons** to help introduce students to Census 2000. The Census Bureau selected Scholastic Inc., a publisher of educational materials for more than 70 years, to develop and disseminate these materials.
In March of 1999, the Census Bureau held a news conference at a Washington, D.C., elementary school to unveil "Making Sense of Census 2000". Participants included the Secretary of Commerce, the Census Bureau director and the chair of the Census Bureau's congressional oversight committee.

The Partnership Program
A key strategy for the successful conduct of Census 2000 was for the Census Bureau to enter into partnerships with **governmental units**, organizations and companies that could help promote the census, encourage people to apply for census jobs, and provide **space for testing, training and questionnaire assistance centers**. The program recognized that the Census Bureau should rely on experts in areas where it is not proficient. The partnership program had a national and regional component. Agreements with major national organizations often were announced at major conferences of the organization.

What does the Census Bureau do the Other Nine Years?
The decennial census is the Census Bureau's most visible activity. As a result, many people have the mistaken impression that we are a temporary agency. Many do not realize that we are responsible for

most of the household and business surveys conducted by our federal government and the economic census and the Census of Governments conducted every five years (in the years ending in 2 and 7). Through the media, PIO promotes the data produced from these activities.
It is believed that if more people find the data valuable, they will be more willing to participate in the surveys and censuses we conduct. Also, if decision-makers find the data useful, Congress is more likely to fund statistical programs.
For our non-decennial programs, PIO also has an aggressive program of working with the media. It has several components:

- Advance notification of release dates for sensitive economic data.
- A bi-weekly "tip sheet" distributed to over 1000 media outlets. It contains information about upcoming demographic and economic data releases with an expected release date, data sets that were recently released.
- Release of non-sensitive data on an embargoed basis, whenever appropriate.
- News releases and product announcements.
- Facts for Features, Census Briefs and *Census & You*. These three products published by PIO present previously released data in more user-friendly form. Facts for Features presents monthly statistical information from the Census Bureau's demographic and economic subject areas pertaining to special observances, events and holidays throughout the year.

Some of the topics include:
Mother's Day
Valentine's Day
Thanksgiving Day
Women's History Month
Back to School
Census Briefs are two-page summaries of findings on a particular subject (e.g., state population projections), complete with color graphs and maps.
Census and You is the Census Bureau's bi -monthly newsletter to the public. Generally eight to 12 pages, the newsletter reports findings based on Census Bureau data and news about Census Bureau programs and services.
Supporting a page on the Census Bureau's Internet site to assist members of the media. A popular addition to these pages is the "minority links for media". These are direct links to the latest data on key demographic characteristics for African Americans, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders and American Indians.
Conducting briefings, workshops and editorial board meetings;
– Holding press conferences to highlight major data releases;
– A daily radio broadcast, *Profile America,* with a companion program in Spanish, *Al Dia* form the radio service of the Census Bureau. These 60-second features highlight information about America, its people and economy. In addition to being available from the Census Bureau's Website, *Profile America* is distributed on CD-ROM, *Al Dia* on cassette. Currently 406 stations and networks are receiving *Profile America* and 51 Spanish language outlets subscribe to *Al Dia.*
– Radio programming targeted to special programs and observances. On occasion, PIO has produced special CDs in support of a particular data program (e.g., the 1997 Economic Census.)

7.2.4 Intermediate census of industrial and service enterprises in Italy

For the first time in the history of Italian economic censuses, between 1997-98, ***the statistical agency, ISTAT*** *carried out* ***a census*** *of industrial and service enterprises* ***earlier*** *than the usual 10-year interval (the previous census had been carried out in 1991). The main reason for carrying out a new census, the so called "intermediate" one, was the need to have an updated profile of the economic structure of the country since the rapid pace of changes over previous years had made the findings of the previous census obsolete with the result that it was not possible to wait for the new 2001 census.*

The ASIA register
The Institute also needed a database which could be regularly updated and in a timely manner taking advantage of the whole system of enterprise and business statistics.
The two needs: to carry out an economic census and create a register were integrated in ASIA, the Statistical Register of Active Businesses databank on over 3,500,000 firms. ASIA was constructed with data already known integrated with those available from other administrative archives. The application of new technologies in the management of public administrations allowed the gathering of data from the different bodies into the central archive. ASIA had thereby ***reduced the statistical burden*** *on enterprises.*

Census procedures
ASIA represented a real ***innovation*** *in the history of economic censuses, and its existence had permitted the realisation of a new kind of census:*
· a smaller number of enterprises directly interviewed. In an economy with more than 3,500,000 enterprises, only 550,000 were directly involved in the census;
· a pre-compiled questionnaire. Enterprises received a questionnaire partially compiled in advance on the basis of data in the ASIA register, so they were only asked to complete and check the data.
· costs and time were reduced. The census was carried out without interviewers and face-to-face interviews.
A telematically linked network of Chambers of Commerce and the central and regional ISTAT offices collected the data, which were then sent to a central database.

Communication during census
The National Statistical Institute, once the questionnaires had been sent, had to face **two types of communication needs**:
· the solicitation of responses from enterprises that had to be interviewed owing to their having provided incomplete data;
· informing enterprises, businesses and individuals of the meaning of the census.
To achieve this aim different strategies were adopted:
· two-phase advertising, the first to request the collaboration of enterprises, the second to focus on the availability of data after its collection and processing;
· dissemination of information on the census (posters and brochures) in specific places such as banks, municipal offices and chambers of commerce;
· use of the ISTAT web site to describe the procedures and significance of the intermediate census. Journalists, researchers, socio-economic operators and non-professional users had increasingly accessed the site. Specific web pages linked to site's home page were prepared;
· urging mass-media to further disseminate information on this initiative.
A **tender** was held and the major agencies operating in Italy were invited **to participate in the communication campaign**. A team was created to select the agency and to explain the purpose of this campaign. The team was composed of the President, the Head Office for Institutional and Business Statistics, the Head Offices for Management Resources, Communications and Marketing.

The role played by media
Radio, television and papers disseminated advertisements but with the exception of "Sole 24 ore" (the main Italian economic newspaper) **coverage was rather limited**. After the delivery of questionnaires a press conference was held in the “Italian economic capital”, Milan. Other **press conferences** were **locally** held, especially in those places **where non-response was expected**. Mass media did play a very important role in the communication process through free or paid advertisements.
· **advertising** on daily newspapers and magazines was used **in the two phases** of communication: in the first phase for enterprises, in the second for businesses, researchers and potential users of census findings;
· radio, and in particular local broadcasting stations were used in the first phase for messages (250 broadcasts by 5 local broadcasting station) addressed to enterprises;
· television, in the first phase three daily spots on each of the three national channels were transmitted for two weeks;

· specialised press disseminated a **brochure with a selection of census findings**. This brochure was partly financed by the Department for information and press of the Office of the Prime Minister.

Release of census data
Upon completion of the operations, **data** of the intermediate census was **made freely available on web site**. For the intermediate census, user-friendly software was developed. Users were able to construct their own tables on the basis of the basic scheme provided by retrieving the necessary data based on the desired cross-references. Data were available down to commune level and could be compared with data from the previous census (1991) for each of the 874 categories of economic activity. Problems in constructing the tables can be solved by accessing an online help menu.
In the previous censuses, in-depth data could be only obtained by requesting customized data from ISTAT the processing of which was expensive and time-consuming depending on the required level of complexity.
From the home page of the web site on census users may select the following levels of information.
· summary data. Pages of "Rapid Note" (Nota Rapida) could be displayed, printed or downloaded in PDF format. "Rapid Note" is freely distributed to media and other users during the press conference outlining the findings of census.
· background information on the census. Why and how it was carried out; description of the ASIA databank; information on measures taken to safeguard people's privacy during data collection and processing;
· products and services. Information on printed census material; review of available products;
· data-warehouse access;
· English language synthesis of findings.
Users without Internet access might consult the system in the Diffusion Centers in every Italian region or in the Chambers of commerce. The service was free, users had only to pay for the materials (diskettes or other) upon which the information they took away was stored. Access to the data-warehouse itself was free.

The response of users
The data-warehouse was presented on December 18, 1998 to press and syndicate associations.
As of December 31, 7,610 data requests had been made. By April 11th, 1999, 1,740 users had made 74,624 requests.

The intermediate census and Istat mission
The dissemination of the intermediate census findings once again illustrated the **dilemma between marketing needs** and the **obligations** arising from the Institute mission: Where is the **boundary** between paid and free of charge information? A choice had to be made. 10% of the Institute's financing was represented by sales of products and by commissioned work for the Public administration.
The remaining 90% was provided by the State. On the one hand the Institute should be able to be at least partially self-financing, however it was decided that the Institute should not give up its mission: to disseminate statistical information and culture, even through non-profitable activities. As such, special attention will be given to “information asymmetries”, namely the need to supply information on issues not requested by the market, such as poverty.

Free of charge dissemination was chosen because this census had been carried out using a **specific source of financing**, however it did not imply that this is the line to adopt. In fact, in the same period, the BBS (Bulletin Board System) containing all the Institute's databases had changed from a free of charge to a subscription/paid access service.
Moreover, **on line dissemination** was a way to directly supply final users with data, **without** passing through the **traditional channels of the press**, radio and television.

7.2.5 Club from agricultural census communication

"Statistical systems have the potential to reduce the range of disagreement between interest groups and to foster objectivity in policy debates. *Numbers do have power*."

According to recommendation of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), **agricultural censuses** are to be taken with a time interval of ten years. With the last full-scope survey held in 1991, Hungarian statistical office began preparation for the next one two years before the reference date of 31 March 2000.

Rapid preparation of the communication conception
The **communication program** for the census was **partly outsourced**, involving a **private firm** (named JDC Ltd), engaged from an earlier date in the communication process of the **population census** (carried out in 2001). As preparatory works for the agricultural census (with its communication) began in August 1999, time had become extremely short, mere six months. The communication activity had been developed by agro-statisticians both in Budapest, the capital and in regional directorates, by Press Office and by JDC Ltd. Having determined the components of census image, a slogan and a logo had been chosen as a result if an internal "tender" within agency's subject-matter departments (in the capital and in the counties).

In order to be able to answer any embarrassing question, a strictly internal set of **"questions and answers"** was elaborated, consisting of some 60-70 issues and containing every possible suggestion. The paper had proved to be useful when answering questions from journalists and served as a guide. For the respondents and reporters one leaflets and one newsletter had been edited, while another leaflet promoted the work of enumerators.

For flagships of the campaign served two **TV-advertising films**, which were produced with the assistance of JDC Ltd, one with a length of 2 minutes 25 seconds, and one spot of 25 seconds. According to a follow-up survey among target groups those of older people liked more the films than the younger audience. As **a criticism** it was expressed that **films missed to quote topics of questionnaire** in detail, instead that they emphasized general aims of the census. The preparation of these materials whipped up the wish of statisticians to show off all those data in some way, which had been collected by the agency during more than a century, this élan resulted in two CD-ROMs.

Foundation of a users' club
In the time of preparations of the first CD-Rom, after having had seen the bulk of its contents, a leading Hungarian journalist stood on the curb with the HCSO's press-officer.
'Why are they so shy, your statisticians?' editor asked.
'Because reporters blamed them, plagued them hurt them by their unjustified suspicions of manipulating data, and…'
'But this happened nearly a decade ago! Highest time to make an end to all that! Why do not you have a club – the milk product-council has got one, offering delicious breakfasts.'
'Great! But please. Do not expect any delicious meal!'
Thus, the idea of a club was formulated. Statisticians seized the opportunity, when delegation from Sweden was invited to dinner by their Hungarian counterparts and on that very evening the 'Circle of Auditors' was founded. As founder members then there were seven **editors** from different media and **statisticians** (with two press-officers). After foundation a list of journalists, specialized on agriculture was drawn up, with intention to have invited someone new from that roll each of the next meetings to. Editors were asked to express their opinion about components of the census' communication strategy. After first meeting it became clear: participation of **leaders** of co-called **agro-interest groups** was also needed, their knowledge of terrain, of producers' sophisticated procedures being indispensable. These groups, called 'product-councils' were extremely powerful, they were fighting in order to promote their interests not only with each other but also with the state and with the consumers.

Hybrid quarterly on agro-statistics
After the second meeting of the Circle it was decided to **publish a journal** (entitled 'Auditor', 20 000 copies), which had became an attractive **quarterly publication**, a sort of a hybrid of agro-statistics

and state's agro-management issues, a forum where every interest-group as well could manifest itself. It came very handy for **communication** of the next year's **orchard and vineyard survey**, when it was even supplemented by a **yearly almanac**.
Birth and existence of the Circle of Auditors was an unexpected gain from agricultural census in Hungary. One of the points of the communication strategy stood on its feet, setting up a special panel, gathering in a constant club agro-statisticians, journalists and representatives of agricultural interest groups. And as amongst the founders of this club are statisticians and press officer from Statistics Sweden, it clearly shows **advantages of work sessions on dissemination for information media**.

Appendix

THE DEED OF ASSOCIATION OF THE CIRCLE OF AUDITORS

WE, THE FOUNDERS, having come together in honourable conference on the last day of the month of the Blessed Virgin – that is to say, January – of the year Two Thousand with the honest intention of constructing a circle of journalists fashioned for future fame,

DO HEREBY ESTABLISH THE CIRCLE OF AUDITORS with the noble objectives of facilitating the public use, dissemination and scrutiny of data gathered by and within the Nationwide Hungarian Central Statistical Office, and, further, of providing an alliance of name and defence for all gentlefolk serving as trusted caretakers of such data,

WHEREFORE THE FOUNDERS present on person do hereby place their respective hands upon this Deed of Association in consummation of such noble initiative, and, in so doing, subject themselves to the provisions of the Constitution of the Circle of Auditors hereby established.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CIRCLE OF AUDITORS

THE CIRCLE OF AUDITORS, being firmly erected by public acclamation upon the solid foundation of the Founder' unfailing belief in a bright future, notwithstanding the incredulous envy of many, shall recruit its membership from the fellows of the Nationwide Hungarian Central Statistical Office and from scriveners of professional eminence and of high morals.

(10 paragraphs of the Constitution)

May our noble and distinguished acts and deeds be thus recorded and passed onto our successors, whom we shall raise and edify in the high spirit of the Circle.

7.3 Dealing with negative press coverage

7.3.1 Misunderstanding Eurostat figures

Eurostat's stance is that we first of all should try to prevent crisis that result in negative press coverage. If a crisis arises, it is important to deal with it as quickly as possible and get in contact with the journalist, preferably in person, to sort out the problem. If the **misinterpretation is widespread**, a **news release**, in some cases together with a **press conference** is a good idea. Finally press officers and experts should always be available to answer journalists' questions.
When providing journalists with statistics there is one major problem – if they get things wrong. Negative reports in the media take different forms. Firstly, journalists may involuntarily **misunderstand** the figures or **misinterpret** them. Secondly, journalists may **misunderstand the functioning** or the **role** of the statistical office, which may in turn affect its reputation and image (see also 7.3).

Eurostat decides how **to react** to negative reports in the press on a **case-by-case basis**. In dealing with **misinterpretation**, the Press Office **seldom reacts**, but sometimes the expert contacts the journalist and explains what the figures really show and/or how they can be used. When Eurostat's image is at stake due to false information, the Press Office considers how to react. In 1997 several counter-statements were sent to newspapers that obviously had misinterpreted Eurostat's role, these were then published. But **counter-statements carry the risk** that readers only remember that there **was a problem with Eurostat,** since the negative information was repeated at least twice.

A more **positive way of reacting** to negative coverage is to issue a news release, **explaining** the misconstrued issues in detail.

Worst ever press attack
In autumn 1996, Eurostat took a decision on a debt and deficit issue regarding France Telecom and was heavily attacked in the press. There were massive misunderstandings of Eurostat's role and its independence was questioned. Consequently, the agency's image was severely damaged.
There were several reasons why this happened, one reason was that the decision was not communicated properly and not explained to the press which made them suspicious of what was going on. A few months later Eurostat was going to decide on a similar case, where the potential of misunderstanding and misinterpretation was just as big. It was decided to issue a news release and explain in great detail what Eurostat's role was and how the decision was reached. A press conference was as well to be held in order to explain the new decisions in detail. The aim was full transparency so that every step of the decision making process should be clear to everyone. This strategy was quite successful and it prevented at least some of the potential negative coverage and restored parts of damaged image.

Prevention strategy
As for most problem areas prevention is better than cure. The best way to deal with negative press coverage is to try to make sure that **tricky situations do not arise**. It is important to be aware of potentially problematic situations.
The name and direct phone number of the expert involved is always indicated on news releases. The expert is asked to be in his office during the same afternoon the press release is issued to make sure he is available to answer any questions.

Small room for manoeuvre
The Press Office's room for manoeuvre, when it comes to dealing directly with the press, is limited, since Eurostat is a Directorate-General of the European Commission and therefore headed by a Commissioner with a spokesman. The spokesman is responsible for Eurostat and his work includes presenting news releases to the journalists accredited to the Commission in Brussels. Since the Press Office is not solely responsible for media relations, it is difficult for it to organise press conferences or create relations with the press of its own accord.

7.3.2 How to handle adverse media coverage

From time to time every large organisation experiences **adverse media coverage**. Occasionally such coverage can be described as fair comment, but more often than not it will be ill-informed. Sometimes it will be **more or less undeserved**, and from time to time it will be without foundation. National statistical institutes with their high public profile, their complex and frequently revised outputs, and their dependence on others for the supply of data, frequently are on the receiving end of this kind of coverage in newspapers, and on radio and television.

Getting alongside the media
In general terms, adverse publicity is less likely if the National Statistical Office has a good working relationship with the media. How is this achieved?

Statistics Finland, for example, has a three-fold policy of making itself useful to the journalists, of trying to get acquainted with them, and of helping them to understand the statistics. The NSI regularly arranges seminars for different groups of journalists - for instance for the news editors from Finland's most popular television channel, and with groups of specialist writers covering subjects such as the environment.

The press office at Statistics Netherlands provides a vital link between statisticians and journalists. It translates the journalists' wishes to the organisation, and ensures that the information given in press notices and by spokespersons meets these demands. This means the journalists need not "translate" the statistical information, which helps deal with the often-heard complaint that journalists do not understand the data, or present it wrongly.

In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics has clear written guidelines on how to deal with the media. These are aimed mainly at senior staff, but are available to all, statisticians' names and phone numbers appear on press notices and publications and officials can expect to take calls from the media as well as the general public. The golden rule is: always keep the press office in the picture.

In any NSI, there is a need for teamwork between those responsible for media relations and officials across the organisation. Clearly, the media-relations specialists need to understand every part of the NSI and keep abreast of developments. But it helps engender a team spirit if statisticians and other officials have some feel for what press relations are all about. In short, the press office needs to devote some time to educating the rest of the office.

Prevention is better than cure

Before looking at the most appropriate means of dealing with adverse coverage and limiting the consequential damage, it is as well to stress that prevention is better than cure. This may seem a glimpse of the obvious, but experience tells us that officials with no responsibility for media relations frequently fail to consider the consequences of their actions.

At the same time, NSIs publish large volumes of raw data and secondary analysis, with significant potential for things to go wrong from time to time. Then again, however independent the NSI, the world at large (including the media) does not readily distinguish the institution itself from the political process that feeds on the data. And the press likes nothing better than errors on the part of public officials, or a row (or what it perceives as a row) between two parts of the public service.

Even so, it is clear that adverse coverage will be less likely if the following guidelines are observed:

- Take particular care not to publish erroneous data or other information: this may seem obvious, but is worth stating loud and clear
- Never criticise another part of government or its data
- Ensure the media-relations section is told of anything that may cause a presentational problem
- Agree in good time the line to take in publishing new data or information and in fielding questions from the media and the public
- Make sure everyone - media-relations people and other officials - sticks to the agreed line
- Modify the line to take as the situation changes
- In dealing with the media take heed of any standard corporate guidance

Damage limitation

When adverse coverage **is** encountered, the following options are available:

- Do nothing – but ensure defensive material is available in case the story generates inquiries from other media outlets. **Advantage:** May well prevent the criticism from being repeated elsewhere, and leaves open the option of responding later if the problem spreads. **Disadvantage:** The reporter may see you as a soft target for the future.
- Talk to the reporter next time he/she is encountered. **Advantage:** Lets him/her know you are monitoring his/her copy so that he/she is likely to take more care in future. **Disadvantage:** The technique won't work if the report is repeated elsewhere.
- Talk to the reporter immediately by phone. **Advantage:** Can put him/her in your debt if you imply you are doing him/her a favour by not taking matters further. **Disadvantage:** Allows the reporter to blame someone else - usually the sub-editor.

Write to the editor for his/her information. **Advantage:** Potentially can educate both the editor and the reporter. **Disadvantage:** May alienate the reporter and possibly will be ignored.
Demand that a correction be printed/broadcast. **Advantage:** If a correction is printed/broadcast, this makes it abundantly clear the media outlet got it wrong. **Disadvantage:** Can be very hard to achieve. Newspapers - and electronic media even more - hate to print (or broadcast) a correction, although sometimes they will agree to a "clarification".
Write a letter to the editor for publication. **Advantage:** If printed as written - which cannot be taken for granted - puts the NSI's response on the public record**. Disadvantage:** Can lead to additional coverage - notably by encouraging readers to write to the letters page.
Issue a press statement. **Advantage:** Puts your point of view firmly into the public domain. **Disadvantage:** Reporters are likely to sense "a row" and further negative coverage is virtually guaranteed.
Clearly, the skill lies in deciding which action is appropriate. One school of thought is to do as little as possible, on the grounds that any reaction will give the matter increased currency. Another approach is always to go in hard, writing a letter for publication every time the agency is criticised. In general, a press statement will be appropriate only if the agency is being harassed from all sides.
As always, there is a need for teamwork between the business area and those responsible for media relations. This is especially the case when it is decided to write a letter to the editor for publication.

Letters to the editor
In writing a letter for publication, some **basic rules** apply:

- No one should write without consulting those responsible for media relations
- Think about the appropriate level of response; is it worth involving the director of the NSI?

Respond quickly - on the same day if possible and certainly no later than the next day
Keep it short – no more than three paragraphs, and two is better
Find a form of words that pinpoints the offence without repeating the criticism
Be polite and positive, and never use extreme language
Unless it is clearly inappropriate, a touch of humour will not go amiss
Mark the letter: "For publication"
Send it by fax.

Real-life complexities
In planning the tactics of damage limitation, it is necessary to **judge** each case **on the individual circumstances** – and often they will be complex. This is illustrated by six case histories drawn from experience in Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom during 1997 and in Italy in 1998. The case histories follow at Annex A.
Whatever happens, even if it is decided to make no formal response, the National Statistical Office must not ignore the problem. Sometimes it will be worth trying to find a well-regarded outside expert to analyse the agency's work and, hopefully, support its case.

Closing the circle
Finally, it is worth remarking that **a critical story** often provides a good **opportunity to make a new media contact**, for those who criticise an National Statistical Office's operations or outputs are likely to be more interested in statistical matters than the average journalist. Often it is worth taking the time and trouble to introduce them to senior officials and to offer them face-to-face briefing on the subject that interests them. Thus the process of education begins, and hopefully next time the journalist writes about the agency and its work he or she will be better informed, more objective - and less critical.

Case histories

1: Unemployment trends in the Netherlands
Unemployment was very low in the Netherlands and once – not for the first time – Statistics Netherlands was accused of "depriving the public of a clear view of unemployment". The drift of an item in de Volkskrant, one of the country's more serious daily newspapers, was that the strong decline in unemployment since 1984 was merely a ***cosmetic trend****, and that the NSI was using*

statistical tricks to redefine *unemployment and present a picture of falling rates. The paper suggested the office was confusing the real picture and "creating" an extremely low unemployment rate "out of the league of the rest of Europe".*
Statistics Netherlands always responds to such allegations, and if necessary uses press office contacts to ensure the reply is published. In this case the director of socio-economic statistics ***drafted a reply****, which calmly countered each accusation, explaining that "unemployment" cannot be captured in a single definition, or therefore a single figure. The "unemployed" part of the population comprises all sorts of people – some who want to work, some who don't, and some who can't, and Statistics Netherlands publishes a range of figures to present a complete picture of this group. The director's letter made it clear that statistics uses* ***different definitions****, that all its figures are based on the answers of people interviewed in the national labour force survey.*
It concluded by stating that the government – and not Statistics Netherlands – decides which of the figures is designated as the "official" unemployment rate.
This ***reaction was published*** *in de Volkskrant during the following week.*

2: Unemployment figures in Finland
Unemployment data have been a problem in Finland throughout the 1990s, largely because Statistics Finland and the Ministry of Labour publish different measures. Usually the Ministry finds more people out of work than Statistics Finland.
The problem came to a head when the harmonisation of Statistics Finland's labour force survey with European practice had some ***surprising effects*** *on the figures. For example, in May 1997 youth unemployment rose significantly as students looked for summer jobs. Because of the different definitions, this had not happened before.*
This caused the ***Prime Minister*** *to give an interview, during which* ***he accused Statistics Finland of producing unreliable data****. This generated 249 stories, and 87 were classified as critical.*
Statistics Finland reacted quickly. The Director General appointed an ***impartial expert group*** *to evaluate the quality of the labour force survey. After a couple of week's work, the group announced that the survey figures were methodologically correct. It also asked the Ministry of Labour to stop calculating the national unemployment rate and acknowledge Statistics Finland's figure as a better indicator.*
The expert group's report cooled the tension considerably. But among journalists there is a tendency to think that the higher unemployment figure must be more correct. The report generated 87 press stories, and ten were classified as negative.

The controversy has continued, although on a smaller scale. In an effort to improve the climate, the Ministry of Labour and Statistics Finland now publish a ***joint release****, with a common description of the labour market and more detailed information. From time to time, the media still makes negative comments, but those involved believe that in the long run the new way of releasing the statistics will lead journalists to a better understanding of the labour market.*

3: General Household Survey suspended in the UK
Following a public consultation, officials of the UK's Office for National Statistics wrote to interested parties to advise them of the ***suspension for one year*** *of the General Household Survey. They* ***did not consult*** *or even advise* ***the press office****, evidently failing to consider the likelihood that one of the recipients would tip off the media.*
The press office decided to ***pre-empt accusations*** *of cover-up or mishandling by feeding the letter to the reporter known to be most interested in the topic, and he subsequently broke the story in the Guardian.*
Coverage elsewhere was inevitable, given an orchestrated public outcry at the suspension of the survey.
A senior ONS official wrote to the Guardian and the Financial Times. Both letters were published, although the Guardian modified the text of the letter without consultation.

4: An unfair accusation in the Netherlands

*The January issue of **Statistics Netherlands' monthly magazine Index**, which was devoted to a number of aspects of "time", was reviewed in Het Parool, one of the national daily newspapers. Although the review was very favourable, it concluded with the following comment, literally translated from the Dutch:*
*"Although **statistics can lie** (about unemployment in the Netherlands, for example), they **can also reveal**".*
*The senior press officer immediately faxed a **letter to the editor** of Het Parool, under the heading **"Statistics Netherlands doesn't lie"**. He stressed the independent position of the Bureau and the unbiased nature of the figures, pointing out that, because of the complexity of unemployment and the various definitions of the phenomenon, Statistics Netherlands calculates a number of unemployment rates and releases a monthly figure in conformity with the definition agreed by employers' organisations, the trade unions and the Central Commission for Statistics. It also pointed out that a press release published less than two weeks previously had contained a complete range of unemployment figures calculated to a range of definitions.*
The letter, which ended by stating that "Statistics Netherlands is not a liar, either in the field of unemployment or in any other field", was published in Het Parool the following week.

5: General government deficit revision in Finland
*In February 1997, Statistics Finland published data on the general government deficit as a percentage of GDP. The figure for the previous year was 2.6, which implied that, even in 1996, Finland's public finances were acceptable from the EMU point of view. However, additional work on the statistics showed **the deficit figure to be greater**. When revised national accounts data were published in July, the deficit percentage was over the EMU criteria line of 3 per cent. **Press** reporters **in Finland failed to spot the problem**, but after the Financial Times wrote about it the Finnish media woke up to the story.*

*The February figure was **characterised as an error**, although the preliminary nature of the data was clearly announced at the time. There were 188 stories in the Finnish press, and 33 criticised Statistics Finland or referred to critical sources.*
The press coverage and the international implications led the Ministry of Economic Affairs to ask Statistics Finland to report on the circumstances leading to the change in the data. Of course the media were keenly interested. When the report was handed to the ministry, the deficit made the headlines again.
But the ministry concluded that there were no great problems with national accounts methodology in Finland.
The story rumbled on for some time, but there was little criticism when new figures were released in February 1998. For one thing the figures were much improved, and for another the preliminary nature of the data was explained very clearly in the release and at the press conference.

6: Mortality statistics in the United Kingdom
*The British Medical Journal, writing about mortality statistics published in the statistical office's quarterly Population Trends, **accused** the agency of acting as a **"spin doctor"** in writing the accompanying news release.*
The accusation was without foundation, because the news release covered a number of topics featured in Population Trends and was written in the usual format and style. Furthermore, the mortality statistics were discussed at length during the press conference held to launch the publication – a press conference to which the British Medical Journal was invited but chose not to attend.
A senior official ONS wrote to the British Medical Journal, which published his letter after a delay of some weeks.
There was no similar coverage in any other publication.

7: Risks in Italy
Italy's Istat ascertained three "delicate" areas in its press coverage:

a. Inflation*: even if the survey methods are the same as in the other countries, there are small consumer associations that contest the basket of the surveyed goods on the whole. The* ***tendency to dramatise*** *information favoured the recurring echo of these comments on the newspapers, like in a soap opera, during the diffusion of the monthly data. In the information on television, risks may arise from the direct confrontation of Istat experts and housewives, without having the time to explain how the indexes work. Successful answers:*

- *Comments on these distortions on the Istat newsletter*
- *Experts from different backgrounds at a scientific convention (opened to journalists) confirmed the method's validity*
- *Polite refusal to take part in television talk shows. Istat officers give interviews, but do not accept discussions on television.*

b. Underground economy*: some people say it is more substantial than it appears in the current GDP. Successful answers:*

- *Explanations on the Institute's newsletter;*
- *The President's interview on a major newspaper;*
- *Careful preparation of the new SEC 95, explaining that actually there could be a small variation of the GDP, but not comparable o the one that occurred in 1987 (+18%).*

3. Unemployment*: the controversy on data reliability (who is really unemployed?) is connected to the one concerning underground economy. In order to explain the complexity of the indexes in this issue, as in other issues, seminars for journalists were considered.*

7.3.3 Negative coverage and the positive role of the press

Is it justified for the subsistence level indices to be named after prime ministers of a country? Could politicians in general be responsible for worsening or improving living standards? What is the role of the press in revealing the citizens' everyday problems, using statistical indices? Is there any room for meaningful dialogue between statisticians and journalists? If yes, what may be the role of each side of this discourse?

Ill-tempered on poverty

One of the Hungarian quality papers published at the end of 1997 an article containing sharp criticism on evolution of the country's subsistence level figures during nineties. Columns of supplemented tables read: "Antall-style" and "Horn-style" figures for subsistence-level indices (hinting at the prime-ministers of respective time-periods). The text itself ***accused*** *the Hungarian statistical agency in* ***political manoeuvre*** *when changing the concept and computation of the subsistence-level indices and questioned the* ***renewed methodology*** *by presenting absolute figures.*

Entitled ***"Subsistence level as maid-servant of politics"****, the paper argued that the previous measurement was abandoned just because by adjusting its figures by the Consumer Price Index, every group of households would show higher sums of income, and for politics of the given government it was more advantageous to use lower absolute figures.*
This approach caused a sort of excitement in the headquarters of the agency for nine months before the article appeared, the agency had carried out ***a campaign*** *to inform the public* ***about changes of measurement*** *– with all its requisites: holding a press conference, issuing a special press release, publishing a scientific study in the statistical monthly.*
This negative approach clearly required ***answer****. In order to remain cool in this burning issue, it was decided to write an article not about the methods of measurement, but on freedom of judgment, on liberty of interpretation of the statistical data. The reply had a title "Opinions on cost of living: an infinite series". The rejoinder emphasised that in politics whatever could become a case for struggle around and that is up to politicians to define the notion of poverty, while the task of statisticians is to show up alternatives and analysis of results. The answer had not involved reaction at all.*

When press initiated measurement
In general, is the press “ungrateful” towards statistics? Not necessarily. As historical experience shows, sometimes **impulses for further observations** came just **from the press.** As the gradual extension of what could be called “measurement of consumers needs and wants” in statistics resulted in separation of one indices into minimum two (that of consumer price indices and that of subsistence level calculations, all that in efforts to increase the reliability of statistics), some analogy may be drawn concerning the perception of various statistical inferences among wider public.
In Hungary it was exactly the case of subsistence level. After the disaster of World War I., rocketing inflation, soaring prices of the consumer goods focused the public attention on the cost of living. As a result, in 1923 almost simultaneously three **periodic journals** began **to deal with the retail prices**: one of them published indices of retail prices monthly, second those of cost of living and the same index was printed by another method in the third. **Statistical agency offered** its own, **professional method three years later**, providing monthly data from the beginning of the year 1925.
So the impulse came from the press, professionals reacted somewhat later – and their common achievement was a set of comparable data, disposable up to 1944.
In this context negative coverage does mean than there possibly always remains a deal of controversy between statistical data, their production and the real processes of social and economic life. But **negative coverage** could transform into **positive yield** for the science.
If consumers of statistical data through mediation of the news media are signalling a new need from the side of general public, sooner or later the profession will be forced to listen to them, to meet this claim by elaborating adequate methods. This would be more useful than the **desperate defence of existing methods**.

7.3.4 Journalists’ high confidence in Statistics Norway

Negative press coverage aimed at Statistics Norway figures rarely happens. Good relations with the media and preventive work secure positive press coverage. Keywords in the preventive work are **openness**, good routines and a **high degree of service**.

Example of openness:
In the spring of 1998 it was revealed that the growth in the Index of retail sales had been largely underestimated. The growth in 1997 and so far in1998 was actually much higher than Statistics Norway had estimated. The positive about this, though, was that the agency revealed this itself. No one in the media had detected that. Statistics Norway chose to be open about this and send out a press release explaining the whole matter. In such a matter it is important to describe to positive news in this mistake: After this correction one will have a much better product because of the adjustment.

Critical and misguiding reports
Wrong use of statistics, figures or graphs should be commented on by Statistics Norway as soon as possible and be adjusted correspondingly. If poor use of source in the media is discovered, the Press Office should be involved, which follows special routines in direct contact with the media. If the media gives a **critical and misguiding report** or the reputation and image of Statistics Norway are at stake **the Director-general should be involved**.
In many cases reports and documents from the Research Department create **a heated debate in the society**. The debate often starts either in an editorial column or from a reader’s letter to a newspaper. **Many debates are positive** to Statistics Norway but when the image and reputation are at stake and the debate is negative it is of great importance to give an interview or send a readers letter to a newspaper to sort it all out. It is important to keep an open mind, be positive and do not hide facts. A **“no comment” is no answer** and does not help in improving the reputation.

7.4. Media crisis management

7.4.1 Riding the crisis

It is not possible to put forward a simple blueprint for dealing with crises, for no two cases will ever be exactly the same. But it should never be forgotten that it is all too easy to get a bad press and never easy to clear up the mess afterwards. Therefore prevention is always better than damage limitation. The **best forms of prevention** are through better **education** of the customers (media) and improved communication (particularly within the statistical institutions) restoring a battered reputation and renewing the confidence will stem from these two measures and from being consistent, co-operative, responding quickly and generally being alert to what is going on around the political and wider world.

What contacts with journalists?
The Federal Statistical Office of Germany conclude:

> *The Federal Statistical Office attaches the utmost importance to maintaining a positive and constructive relationship with the media. A comprehensive information service for the media and well-trained staff, who are experienced in recognising the risks when dealing with media, as well as a clear and transparent relationship with the journalists – these are the bases of the Office's* ***press policy*** *aimed at establishing among the media, and thus the public at large, its profile as an objective, independent and modern information provider well acknowledged among experts.*
>
> *Presswork is a matter for the top management level. Especially in cases of "malicious" journalism it is always advisable not to establish direct contact between* ***statistical experts*** *in the specialized departments and the* ***journalists*** *because in such contacts the trusting attitude of statistician inexperienced in such situations may easily be taken advantage of.*

While concurring with most of these, **the UK** stated that as to the final paragraph it adopted the **opposite approach**. Direct contact between journalists and statisticians were allowed and even encouraged – despite their sometimes misguidedly trusting attitude. Instead of "throwing them to the lions", to enhance statisticians understanding the ways of the **press training courses** were arranged, and they are **allowed to talk directly** to the press only **once they had attended** one. This procedure built a greater trust between ONS and the media, and because there is direct contact between the statistician and the journalist it had reduced at least one layer where errors or misunderstanding could creep in. For **dealing with media crisis** three points was seen as paramount in UK:

1. Never lie.
2. Do not cover up.
3. Always move quickly, robustly and from the top!

Media Crises: from time to time all get them. Sometimes it is the agency's our **own faul**t; sometimes it is because of a **misunderstanding** or **misinterpretation**; and sometimes it is because of pure **mischief**. But what and where are the dangers and how can we best avoid them? How can we deal with them as they happen? And how can we repair the damage?

Controversial issues
Before one can avoid a crisis it is useful to establish some likely battlefields. There are many 'friction points' or 'areas of controversy' from which a crisis may emerge. To begin with, **censuses, surveys** and statistical **inquiries** can be an immediate **source of conflict** with the public, industry and hence the media.
It is at this point where the data collectors meet the public that almost anything can happen. Population Censuses are such massive exercises that in the UK special teams are recruited and dedicated to deal with the publicity and media campaigns. Censuses, surveys and inquiries are the "sharp-end" of data collection when information is actually extracted from the public and business. Not everybody likes being asked questions and one should not be surprised when objections are

raised – rightly or wrongly. Sadly, some of these people will take their **complaints to the media before** trying to **resolve** them with the statistical institution.

'Danger zones'
Examples of issues that make 'good media copy' are:

- intrusive questions (government and agencies 'prying into personal business that should be none of its concern');
- confidentiality (worries that personal information may get in to the wrong hands);
- burden on business (too many 'unnecessary and over-detailed questions' from government and agencies making it impossible for business to operate efficiently);
- compliance costs.

Sometimes it is the **type of data collected** that is potentially **troublesome**. For instance collecting information on children, sexuality, race, migration, family relationships, income/earnings, health, taxation and religion.

While these points are issues one has to deal with in **day-to-day running** of the proper business, there are other **conflict points**, which may be described as **'political'**. These broadly include:

- independence of the statistical office;
- objectiveness of its data, reports and findings;
- politicians wanting to use data for party political point-scoring;
- deliberate sophistry by government (using narrow interpretation of data to suit a politician's purpose);
- limits to accuracy of data;
- leaks of market-moving data.
- 'Education is the starting point' while dealing with press. It is only by press-oriented, informative and transparent cooperation with journalists that one can achieve a positive public awareness of the statistical office's profile.
- Stories in the media *about* official statistics are a basis for information of the media by statistics. In supplying the population and economic agencies with information, the media have a 'multiplier' function.
- Surveys, particularly with private households but also with business, are to be prepared including extensive press activities in order to create a positive attitude towards the survey among the respondents. The results of previous surveys are preferably presented in an appealing manner to make the press eager to receive the new results. Also, brochures and leaflets containing results of the preceding survey have to be distributed.
- As soon as available, the results of the current survey are to be disseminated through numerous press releases. For that purpose 'real life' topics must be chosen, thus appealing to the public at large. The source is always mentioned.
- Major economic indicators should be regularly explained in detail to the media and to the experts from banks and associations by means of press briefings and specific seminars, to avoid possible misinterpretation and confusion.

Response – the 4 Ms
There are some key areas where statistical institutes could be vulnerable to a crisis in the media. We all live in a tinderbox of **potential media disaster**, but it usually needs a spark to ignite the flames. The likely spark for those flames could come from one or more of what is called for illustration the 4Ms – **Mistakes, Misunderstanding, Misinterpretation and Mischief**. The Federal Statistical Office of Germany adds a fifth M – **Misuse**.

If mistakes occur, do not make them worse! Sloppiness in producing the data needs to be eradicated. That said it is known the **pressures under which data are produced** and also that the media expect the published product to be perfect in every way. Although statisticians may know that published data are a trade-off between timelines and accuracy, others do not. They are criticised if the figures have to

be revised alter and they are criticised if the figures are not produced 'instantly'. This is a **no-win situation**.
The more mistakes you make the less credibility the organisation will have. The media will call into **question the competence of the institute**. To understand how 'mischievous misinterpretation' may trigger a crisis every agency need to look closely at its own media. How objective are they? Do they have their own agenda? Do they have a political master (whether overtly or less obviously)?

Two errors, two outcomes
(Case study from UK): *What if the figures have put out are so seriously wrong that the markets and government policy and strategy may be affected? In 1998 the UK Office of National Statistics* ***ran into trouble with its Average earning data****. In truth, the final outturn showed the errors to have been less major than was originally perceived. However, the 'mix' that created the crisis was potent. There was misunderstanding, political manipulation, city indignation, and calls for resignation…*
Actions taken started with ***suspension of the series*** *(a move that created some new problems of its own) and the launch of an inquiry into getting the figures right. Efforts were also made not to let damage done from the discrediting of one series from discrediting the whole output of the organisation. Telling the truth and keeping the media and customers in the picture was seen as positive. However, the inquiry dragged on for far longer than was desirable. Damage to the series echoed two years later but in the main, other series remained credible.*
An earlier error *in a consumer prices series was dealt with by an immediate correction and apology and, in fact, was* ***turned into a positive by media*** *who saw it as 'refreshing' that a government agency was being open and honest.*

React or not?
(Experience of Statistics Sweden): *It is always difficult to weight the pros and cons of responding when statistical data are misused or when adverse comments are made about Statistics Sweden. On the one hand, if one responds one runs the risk of prolonging a negative discussion and of drawing more people's attention to it. But on the other hand, observant readers may believe that criticism is justified if no response is forthcoming.*
Statistics Sweden has no hard and fast policy of responding to adverse comments in the press: each case is assessed individually. Of the total of 800 to 1000 press cuttings each month in which Statistics Sweden is named, generally only a handful are the kind that might lead us to consider whether to make a comment. It was more often chosen to respond to criticism than to retain from doing so when adverse criticism has been expressed or statistics have been interpreted in an obviously erroneous manner. Generally do responses are given to personal columns in anecdotic style, satirical attacks. Where misunderstandings or misinterpretation are involved, or when the quality of our statistics is called into question, always a rejoinder is issued. The newspapers ***publish*** *Statistics Sweden* ***comments*** *or corrections on roughly* ***half of all cases****. The work put into elaborating a response is not in vain in the other cases, as Statistics Sweden's rejoinder ends up in the newspaper's archives alongside the original article. This at any rate means that the same mistake will not be repeated, at least not by the same newspaper.*
The initiative *in writing a response or a correction can either be taken by the Director-General, the Chief press Officer or the statistician concerned. When it is purely a matter of correcting facts, it is the statistician concerned in the subject-matter area in question who writes the text, even if it is the Chief Press Officer who later contacts the editor.*

A 'shocked minister' and a work of fiction
(From German practice): *Pensions and the question whether their funding is ensured for the future are an explosive political issue in Germany. Any newspaper article creating the impression that the authorities responsible for pension planning disagree on the relevant basis for calculation will definitely be a success with the readers.*
The business magazine Capital provided an example in 1999:
It published an article concerning the minister of social affairs, Mr. Riester. Its headline was "Riester trapped" and it included a picture of the minister with the caption "Helpless. The minister of social

affairs, Mr. Riester, needs a completely new pension formula". In the list of contents, the article was referred to as "Federal Statistical Office shocks Riester". The text explained that the ninth population forecast of the Federal Statistical Office in Wiesbaden would mess up the ministry's pension plans. It was stated that "The Weisbaden-based authority is making a U-turn", and the President of the Federal Statistical Office was quoted as saying "Let's stop glossing this over!" What had happened?
Nothing! The quotation was completely fictitious, the author had never talked to the President of the office about the matter. At the time, the Federal Statistical Office had not even published the ninth population forecast. The office had issued no figures at all on the issues of pensions and the average age of the population in the period before the article was published.
The name and reputation of the federal Statistical Office and of its president were misused to start a political mock fight.

The reaction of the agency was very determined:

- *On the very day of the publication of that capital issue, the office published a press release correcting things and stating the facts; "The Federal statistical Office firmly rejects the attempt of Capital to politically misuse the office and its president in the current discussion on pension policy. According to the Federal Statistics Law, the federal Statistical Office is bound to strictly observe the principles of neutrality, objectivity and scientific independence. Ever since it has existed, the office has applied those principles with no consideration for political or media opportunity.*
- *Moreover, the office published again the really relevant figures on average age and gave specific explanations.*
- *The Federal Statistical Office immediately contacted the ministry, agreeing with it on how to deal with the media.*
- *The President of the Federal Statistical Office lodged a complaint with the German Press Council and obtained a preliminary injunction that the article must no longer be distributed.*

Busy during the weekend
(Case of the German office): *When the convergence criteria for participation in the third stage of the European Economic and Monetary Union were first published for the Federal republic of Germany, a researcher of a renowned German economic research institute doubted in an interview that the calculation of net borrowing was correct. A regional politician demanded that the calculation be critically checked. The data were presented in a press conference on Friday morning, while the interview was held in the afternoon of the same day.*
A national radio station referred to the interview with the researcher on Saturday morning. Considering the political explosiveness of the issue, it was absolutely necessary to immediately react the same day. Any delay would have seriously damaged the office's reputation. A press release was distributed to the press agencies in the afternoon and broadcasting a counterstatement was arranged for the major TV news programs that evening. The press covered the controversy on Sunday and Monday.
On Monday morning, the office contacted the research institute, and both institutions issued a more detailed press release. On Wednesday, a top-level discussion was held with the institute, followed by a press release in which the institute again admitted its error and confirmed the office's calculation to be correct. Having reacted immediately and clearly and having communicated in an open and transparent manner with the press at all stages allowed the office to manage the crisis without damage.

Options when bad news is out
Education is really the starting point. We need to **help journalists** who use statistics regularly to understand how and why they are compiled, how they should be used and what are the limitations of the data.
This may **encourage a more mature use** and interpretation **of data in the media**. Regular seminars and briefings can help but it must always be remembered journalists do not like being lectured.

There are some simple guidelines to follow:

- Agree the line to take and make sure that everyone (press officers and officials) stick to it
- BUT be ready, prepared and willing to modify the line as a situation changes.
- Ensure that ministers and top officials are kept informed where appropriate
- Never criticise other government departments, agencies or private organisations or the figures they may put out (stoking up a row is meat and drink to the media)
- Ensure that press office is told of anything that might cause a presentational problem.

Options when bad news is out and spreading are (in ascending order of activity):

- Do **nothing in public**. Frequently it is the best option. Adding fuel to a fire is often the last thing you want. However, behind the scenes defensive material should be gathered and made available to press officers **in case the story escalates**.
- **Talk to the reporters** the next time the press is encountered to steer them to a more favourable course/attitude.
- Talk to the reporter immediately and express the urgency of putting the issue right.
- Write to the reporter's superior for hi/her information.
- Demand that a correction be printed/broadcast.
- Issue a press statement.

Every situation needs to be judged on its own merits and there are two equally powerful schools of thought which on one hand say you should always tend to the 'do-least' scenario, while others would argue you should go in hard every time. The first scenario leaves you open to being seen as a 'soft touch'. The latter scenario opens up the spectre of 'a row' and additional negative coverage.
In the UK a system of **'rapid rebuttal'** was used across most areas of government where policy came under criticism. This is of course rather harder to do dealing almost wholly with data, but is possible where data can be foreseen are likely to cause controversy – less so where someone blunders. But even with the most active and rapid rebuttal system it is impossible to counter every example of inaccuracy or bias.

Rules of crisis management
(Statistics Sweden crisis procedure): When a crisis arises, it is important that the appropriate action be taken. It can be of vital importance that the staff has been **trained in managing a situation of crisis**. One fundamental rule is that it is **never possible to hush something up** once it had hit the headlines. Once the media have drawn attention to a mistake, it is futile to hope that the criticism will die down if one refrains from making a response.

- The best thing that can be done is to discover any mistakes or inaccuracies oneself, so as to **keep the information initiative**. This enables one to take subsequent measures more on one's own terms, to assume a more offensive attitude.
- Corrected information must be distributed as promptly as possible.
- **"Admit you were wrong"**, "do not lie" and "apologise" are other pieces of advice that media consultants consider important.
- In crisis situations it is also important that agreement exist on who is responsible for contacts with journalists. Further, these people must be available at all times.
- It can be an advantage to distribute a correction late in the day so as to give the daily newspapers limited time to notice it. The chances of the correction being given a lot of space diminish if it reaches the newsroom late in the day.

There is **no guarantee** that one will **succeed in moderating public attention** to non-desirable facts or situations. But Statistics Sweden did make successful use of these procedures on one occasion when the wrong method of estimation was used in a commissioned piece of work and the result was given a lot of space in the media. The correction, with accurate figures, was printed in an inconspicuous place, but this time no critical comments were directed towards Statistics Sweden. This strategy **can function** in the case of **isolated mistakes** if they do not occur too frequently. In situations of crisis where the criticism has political undertones, e.g. in connection with a Population and Housing Census, a **confidence capital** that has been built up over a long period **can quickly crumble**, regardless of whether relations with the media have been conducted according to all the rules of the game.

7.4.2 "When Bad Things Happen to Your Good Name"

When a crisis occurs, today's media pose different challenges than previously – some good, some bad. However, as statistical agencies facing the contention of publishing quickly but accurately and posting more data sets to the Internet without the same scrutiny of printed publications, one is more vulnerable to damaging one's good name it took years to build. As communications professionals, must insist that their agencies be prepared for various types of crises, have a process to follow if a crisis occurs, and provide crisis communications training to appropriate staff.

"There cannot be a crisis… my schedule is already full." – H. Kissinger.

As statistical agencies one can expect a crisis will occur one way or another in time. There are various types of crises, which may be experienced:

- Accident or injury to employee;
- Employee disturbance or attack;
- Falsification of data;
- Loss of confidential data;
- Unauthorized access to Web site or computer network;
- Unauthorized access to Criminal activity by employee on or off the job;
- Public denunciation of a census or other data collection;
- Protest or demonstration;
- Natural disaster;
- Bomb threat;
- Payroll or other administrative problems;
- Impersonation of employee doing household interviews;
- Attack by politicians who do not like your data or the data you are collecting;
- Challenges to your professional expertise; and
- Data. Errors.

When **a crisis happens**, it is important that agencies take the necessary steps to protect our employees and the statistical community; **"speak with one voice"** and **coordinate** with appropriate offices; prepare spokespersons to give consistent, accurate responses; and **control rumors or misstatements** by the public, media or employees. Taking an open and honest, proactive approach to handling crises will enable you to contain the damage that can occur to your good name.
The goal of good crisis communication management should be to ensure that all the news, good or bad is communicated as soon as you can confirm it. If there is bad news, get it out all at once – to all the media at the same time.

Getting Prepared

A. Crisis Response Team(s)
A crisis response team(s) should be **formed before crises occur** and **receive training**, usually by a consultant or former journalist. Ideally, no more than **10 people should be on a team**. Membership on the team should be flexible and determined by the incident. Generally, **members** should include the agency head; agency deputy or Chief Operating Officer; staff from the communications area; and executive level manager from the part of the agency where the crisis occurred. The team(s) are responsible for developing a response to the situation for the media (initial statement, distribution); communicating, as appropriate, to other government agencies; overseeing all operations for the crisis response; communicating to agency employees, field offices, and other stakeholders. Whatever the

composition, it is critical that the **public affairs staff** be included on the team and play and **integral role** in shaping the response and its wording.

B. Crisis Response Center
As part of planning for the inevitable crisis, identify a location that will serve as the "response" or "nerve" center. The response center is the focal point for handling the crisis and access is restricted to team members and designated support staff. As the "nerve" center, it will function as the main inquiry-fielding location during a crisis and the base for developing and coordinating communications with target audiences (both internal and external.)

The center should be a private conference room or large office that is:
– Equipped with dedicated telephones, speakerphones; computers wired to the Internet with secure e-mail software and fax machines; has the capacity to increase phone lines, if necessary (remember, you do not want to discuss sensitive information on a mobile phone);
– Equipped with easel pads and markers, writing pads and pencils, phone logs and other reporting forms used to record information about the crisis;
– Equipped with a television and radio and recording equipment to monitor and log news coverage;
– Inaccessible to press or public.

All **members** of the response team(s) should **be familiar with the center** and equipment. Equipment should be tested periodically to ensure it operates. Any necessary manuals and written protocols also should be stored at the center for reference purposes. Always have a back-up location in case you must evacuate the primary response center location.

C. Standby Statements
Work with your communications and operational staff to identify the kinds of situations your agency is likely to experience. Then have the communications staff draft standby **statements that can be issued** quickly to the press while you **are still assessing the situation**. Standby statements are illustrative examples of what might be said and will need to be modified to fit the particular situation. Amendments to the statement might include:
1. Were there injuries, fatalities?
2. Were outside emergency personnel called?
3. Was the building damaged?
4. What steps were taken to control the situation?
5. What property or data were lost and/or damaged?

The statements always should include the positive core messages that you want to get across despite the crisis situation. Preparing draft standby statements prior to needing them helps assure that the right bases are covered and, hopefully, that you do not say anything that might result in litigation.

D. Training
Provide crisis communications training to members of the response team and others that might serve as a spokesperson. If your communications staff does not have the expertise to do the training, consider bringing in an outside expert. Use possible crisis scenarios and encourage the response team to work together in handling the "fictitious" crisis. This enables the team to develop rapport without the stress of a real situation. Conduct periodic refresher training. Remember that staff change and our vulnerabilities will change.

Handling the Crisis

A. Five Stages of a Crisis
1. *The event*. Something happens. You might be present when it happens or you might learn about it from a phone call. The event also could be a reporter or citizen's call with a question.
2. *First reactions*. Those involved in the event react, and you react to the information. Knowing that events can happen at any time, we need to be prepared to act calmly, thoughtfully and quickly.

3. *First actions*. What do you do first? Get the facts. Try to determine, as best you can, what actually happened. If possible, try to get verification of the facts. Answer these questions:

- Who is involved?
- Are there any injuries?
- Is there physical danger to anyone?
- Where and when did the event occur?
- Do any emergency personnel (police, fire and ambulance) need to be called?

4. *Follow-through*. This is the actual handling of the event or crisis. There are two goals for this stage:

- First, to respond appropriately with actions or statements that will take the event out of the "emergency" phase and get accurate information to the media and the public.
- Second, to gain some measure of "control" of how the event is regarded by the media and the public, continuing to provide accurate information, giving the appearance of having the situation under control.

5. *Monitoring*. Is the event over? Has media or public interest in the event subsided? Is interest escalating? Does more need to be done? During this stage, keep in regular contact with all offices involved.

Critical factors are speed, accuracy, honesty and consistency in communications.

1. Assessing the Situation

How you respond in the **first few minutes** of a crisis **can affect** how the crisis is handled, and can have an effect on **how the media** and the public think you are handling the situation. By its very nature, a crisis is an emotional situation that requires a level of detachment and calm. The Crisis Response Team should:

- Get the facts – Determine the exact nature of the crisis.

– *What has occurred*? Get a complete description of the situation and when and where it has taken place.

– *Who is involved*? Are those involved your employees only or are members of the general public involved as well?

– *Why has a crisis developed*? Understanding the root cause of the crisis will enable you to better assess the situation.

- Get organized – Keep a record of key information. Develop or use existing forms to collect call information and keep a record of media inquiries. A Crisis Response Call Tree may prove helpful in making sure that everyone in the chain of command has been contacted and that communications flow up and down the chain.
- Communicate – Establish a time to meet at the Crisis Response Center.

2. Assign responsibilities

Determine who will do what including principal spokesperson duties, internal and field communications, statement drafting and issuance, press conference, media notification. If communication to other government agencies, stakeholders or legislative bodies is warranted, specifically assign someone.

3. Take appropriate action

In addition to agreed mechanics in issuing a response, specific key media contacts should be assigned to communications staff for follow-up, to help ensure messages are reliably delivered.

4. Monitor the situation

The communication specialist should assign staff to monitor the developing situation and the reaction by the media to your response.

B. Working the Media

The goals of communication between your agency and the news media are to:

- Ensure that the media receive timely and accurate information;
- Focus the public's perception of how the crisis is being handled;
- Develop appropriate expectations rather than waiting for them to be created by the media; and
- Reduce the chance of misinformation being reported to the public. Your agency's response must follow the six cardinal rules of crisis communications management. All communications must be:

- Factual – never speculate;
- Compassionate – always convey concern for the people involved;
- Candid and forthright about all proactive steps being taken;
- Targeted directly to priority audiences;
- Positive and consistently persuasive; and
- Delivered as quickly as possible.

Remember, do not deny the obvious; do not place blame; and don't forget that privacy regulations apply during disasters and other incidents. Always stay "on the record." No matter what a reporter says about something being "off the record," and no matter whom the reporter is**, there is no such thing as "off the record."** Consider that anything you say to a reporter could be on the evening news or the front page of tomorrow's paper. We must remember that newspapers, radio and television stations are a business. They are in the business to increase circulation, listeners or viewership. However, they also may make mistakes. Developing a rapport with an outlet and its management can be of utmost assistance should a crisis occur.

The Interview

Prepare thoroughly. Know the latest facts and information. Have supporting material available on paper.

Anticipate which questions are most likely to be asked and know the key points you want to make.

Be available. Always respond to media calls as soon as possible. Make certain that phone messages from the media are among the first to be returned. It is critical that an open channel of communication is immediately established with the media.

Speak to be understood. Answer the questions in complete, easy-to-understand sentences. Avoid using jargon and acronyms. Speak to the audience's interests.

Be positive. If a reporter asks, "Why haven't you fixed the problem?" do not answer, "We haven't fixed the problem because…" A better response is "We have been moving as quickly as possible to ensure the safety of everyone involved. Make as many positive points as you can.

Be accurate. Do not speculate or guess an answer. If you do not know, say so. Then commit to getting the information as quickly as possible.

Tell the truth. An organization is only as believable as the people who represent it. Once caught in a lie, it is difficult to regain credibility, and years of positive reputation building can be destroyed.

Specific Considerations for Television

Control the visual. Pictures tell a story, so carefully consider where you will conduct the interview. Choose a location with a neutral background. Pre-identify possible locations for holding news conferences.

Be brief, focused and conversational. Stick to your key, positive points. For most stories, the reporter is only going to use a 10 or 20 second sound bite.

Never assume the recorder is turned off. Any time a camera and/or microphone is near, consider yourself "on stage" and act and speak accordingly.

Look at the reporter, but talk to the audience. Do not look at the camera; rather, speak to and look directly at the reporter. Remember, though to address your remarks with the viewer in mind.

Keep your hands and body relatively still. Even though you may be nervous, the camera can sometimes make fidgeting people look more like they're not responding truthfully. Be careful not to nod in agreement to a question simply because you understand it. The question may have a negative implication, and you will be on camera appearing to agree with it.

Dress appropriately. Business attire. If the crisis hits on an evening or weekend, more casual clothing can be worn with a blazer or sports jacket. Avoid T-shirts or clothing with logos or other writing (unless it is your agency's.) If make-up is offered, use it. Cameras magnify sweat and can make you appear nervous or out-of-control.

Try to relax. Remember that you have something important to say. Stretch your facial muscles, roll your shoulders forward, and breathe deeply in through your nose and exhale out of your mouth before you begin the interview.

Tools to help during a crisis

Today's media operates at lightening speed. The advent of the Internet, and extensive reliance on broadcast media by the public for its news means that as public relations professionals, we need to **consider all avenues of repairing** whatever damage may have been done to one's good name.

Crisis from erroneous addressing
*U.S. example: Several weeks prior to the mail out of the questionnaire, the Census Bureau planned to mail an advance letter alerting the American public to the importance of the census. However, a few days before theses mailings were to occur, the Bureau received information from the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) that there was a **problem** with the **house number** portion **of the address for the advance letters**. An **extra digit was erroneously inserted** in front of the house number on the address of the advance letters. For example, a letter with the correct address of 101 Main Street would incorrectly appear as 1101 Main Street.*
*On the face of it, this may not seem to be much of a crisis as the error was consistent and easily fixed. However, this **error occurred** at a time when the majority side of **Congress was publicly questioning** our ability to conduct a successful census. The chair of subcommittee had characterized Census 2000 as a **"failed census"** and used this rhetoric to attack our plans to statistically adjust the count to improve its accuracy.*

*There was another issue with the advance letter. For the **first time**, the Census Bureau was making available census questionnaires **not only in English and Spanish**, but also **Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog**. The process for requesting a special language form was to check the appropriate language needed and return the advance letter in the envelope provided. Many in these Asian communities were not aware that they needed to proactively request the forms. At the same time the Bureau was addressing the extra digit problem, **criticism was escalating** for the Bureau not doing a better job of getting the word out to those linguistically isolated populations. The Communications Directorate decided to try **to address both issues at the same time**.*

Steps to correct impaired image
To counter the possible bad press, the Census Bureau response team quickly did several things:
- *Fact-finding determined that the **error did not result** from an action **on the part of the Census Bureau.** The contractor caused the error by picking up the wrong fields when making the address labels. While the printed house number was incorrect, the postal bar code that is used by USPS automated equipment to sort the mail was correctly imprinted on the advance letter. The bar code is the actual basis for most USPS delivery, not the printed address.*
- *The Bureau **investigated checked other mailings** (questionnaires, reminder postcards) and determined that this problem did not effect the production, mailing or delivery of other census mail pieces. The printing of the advance letters was an operation independent of the printing of the other census forms and questionnaires.*
- *Census Bureau Director issued a **statement to the media expressing regret** for the error and assuring the public that this would not affect the census. The statement explained how the error occurred and that Bureau staff as part of the quality assurance process should have caught the problem.*
- *A **fact sheet** on the Census 2000 advance letter mailing also was created that outlined the problem, what the Census Bureau was doing, that the problem had no effect on other mailings, the purpose of the advance letter and what the American public should do. The fact sheet was given to the media as well as to various stakeholders like our advisory committee members, Members of Congress, over 150,000 local government, corporate and community organization partners.*
- *Director did one-on-one interviews with press from major newspapers.*
- *Staff from our Public Information Office worked over the weekend to field media inquiries.*
- *$1 million was spent on new advertising: Mechanicals in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog were produced for handbills and posters, Video News Releases (VNRs) were produced and fed 4 times to the media. The VNRs featured Dr. Prewitt and a postal service representative. In addition to explaining that the digit problem would not affect the delivery of the advance letter or census questionnaire, the feed also discussed how to request a form in a language other than English.*

All of this occurred during the first few days after finding out about the problem from the postal service.
*The results? **One week after** the problem of the extra digit occurred, the **story was dead**. The Press was no longer covering the story. Positive stories were appearing about our outreach to those with linguistic problems and that we appeared to be going all-out to include everyone in the census.*

PAPERS USED:

8. (Use and support of the news media in promotion of key statistical releases, national censuses and other surveys) P12, P14 +
8.1. (Measuring success):? V9, P12
8.2. Dealing with negative press coverage C12, C9, C20, C7, C22
8.3. Media crisis management V9, V12