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Topic (ii): How to decide which stories to tell and to ensure they are of high quality

DISSEMINATING DATA: A JOURNALIST'S VIEW

Contributed Paper

Presented by Bruce Little, The Globe and Mail, Canada

It's obvious from the design of this conference that you all know the key issues involved in getting statistical commentary into broad circulation. The four sessions cover exactly the right ground: making a story; deciding which stories to tell and telling them properly; getting those stories out to the public; and pulling together material from disparate sources to produce a coherent, well-rounded tale.

My task is to say something helpful about the second of those subjects – the story decision itself and the standards of quality involved. I hope you'll forgive me, however, if I stray occasionally into the other areas of discussion. All four issues are so tightly integrated that it's difficult to comment on one without saying something about the others.

Let's begin with the question of what kind of material you are discussing. You use the word 'commentary' in your program when I think you really should be using the word 'analysis'. The difference is more than one of semantics. For most people in the media, the word 'commentary' means opinion. People who write 'commentary' columns or articles are writing opinion pieces. My own newspaper runs a couple of pages a day of opinion under the heading of 'Comment' and many other papers follow the same pattern.

I don't think that's what you want. So if you are going to guard your impartiality – obviously a major concern for national statistical organizations – then you are better off to talk about statistical analysis than statistical commentary. We in the media expect you to be good at statistical analysis and no one will fault you for doing it; but if you portray yourselves as commentators, you are asking for trouble – not just from the media, but from politicians and interest groups as well.

Let me add a subtle note of realism here. Analysis, by its nature, can be commentary, even if you don't acknowledge the fact. Let me offer an example from my own experience. In addition to writing news stories and features, I write two columns a week: one is explicitly a commentary column – I can be as opinionated as I like; the other is strictly an analysis of recent data in which I try to highlight a trend or a set of economic facts or some interesting research that has gone largely unnoticed or unreported. Yet many readers have told me that they detect opinions (left-wing or right-wing, depending on their own biases) in my choice of which data I write about and in the inferences I draw (the analysis) from the numbers.

They are right, of course, though some people occasionally give me credit for extremely clever sub-texts that I hadn't intended – or even noticed. Still, some of my opinions are implicit in these columns – if only in my choice of topics – and that's fine with me. What's important for you, however, is to avoid the perception of bias and political leaning. So dump the word 'commentary'.

Clearly, you already know how to decide if a topic is newsworthy. You've set out the criteria in your program. Is the issue already being widely discussed by politicians and the public? Is the public debate ill-informed because too many people have paid too little attention to your data, either because they do not know it exists or because it's too complex for them to assess on their own? Has media coverage ignored a useful aspect of the issue, creating a gap that you can fill with some timely analysis?

Those are all the right questions, though the answers will be sometimes easy and sometimes extraordinarily difficult. No one is going to object to an analysis of the job market in the past year, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses and reasons for each. But no statistical agency is going to jump into an assessment of whether or not regional economic grievances (for example, to what extent do rich regions subsidize poor regions?) are justified by the data.

So how you go about being relevant without being banal?

Let me suggest a process with a hidden goal. I hope I can express this clearly because I have to set aside for a moment your immediate questions that I should address. I assure you I will return to them.

One of your goals should be to encourage the media to get into the habit of coming to you for information. Too many people in the media know too little about the work you do and too many are reluctant to approach you because – and this might surprise you – they are scared of you.

Your target audience among the public mainly consists of people who are intelligent and usually (but not always) well-educated. They may not know much about the subject at hand, but they have a lively interest in many things and are willing to put in the intellectual effort to understand new material. Your problem is that – to a considerable degree – you have to go through journalists to get to that audience, although the internet is giving you much more direct access to many more people.

For the most part, journalists are wonderful folks, I assure you, but too many – when it comes to statistics – too often get the story wrong, get it incompletely, or don't get it at all. As a group, journalists are ham-handed with numbers because many are innumerate. And the reason – trite, perhaps, but largely true – is that you're dealing with humanities majors here. My colleagues might find this rude, but journalists are often people who avoided maths and sciences in school because they didn't like numbers. They preferred words, so they studied languages or history or philosophy – fields in which they could go forever without encountering a number more difficult than a year or an ISBN number. And from there, they went into journalism because it was a field in which they could continue to work with words.

When you don't understand something, you tend to fear it. Many journalists fear numbers and do what they can to avoid them. And by extension, that means many are inclined to avoid you, the statisticians. So if you want to enhance your reputation for relevance, you have to produce material that will first bring you to the attention of such people so that you can let them know how useful – and approachable – you are.

Let me give you one example from Canada. Gambling is of interest to everyone. As different parts of Canada have experimented with different forms of gambling – casinos, slot machines and lotteries – Statistics Canada has established itself as a key source of information. It has done so though a combination of sound analysis, clearly written articles, quotable experts and some shrewd communications work. It periodically produces analyses of government gambling revenues that the media love. Even those who fear numbers can overcome their phobia long enough to read a release on gambling. But one enterprising Statscan communications person in Toronto went a step further. There are three major casinos in Ontario, none of them in Toronto, the province's biggest city. When one particularly good report was published, she called news editors at the local papers in those centres – none of which has a reporter in Ottawa. She told them the report was available and sent copies, along with the phone number of the author. My guess is that each of those papers now pays much more attention to gambling data than it did before.

That's an example of leverage – using a juicy report to grab the attention of journalists, who in the future will be more comfortable about coming to you for information.

All right. It's time to come back to the central questions.

How do you select topics? As I said earlier, you've largely answered that question already in terms of the criteria for newsworthiness. But let me add a couple of other criteria.

First, ask yourselves this question about each issue you consider for analysis – Does it have legs? By that I mean: Is this a subject that it of continuing interest to the public? If you want to make an impact, don't waste a lot of time on one-off studies of narrow interest with a short shelf-life. Focus your efforts on broad issues that are likely to remain interesting to the public for a long time.

A few subjects come to mind: The Kyoto Accord and other environmental issues; demographic change; immigration; productivity issues; income distribution; health outcomes.

Periodic analyses of action to meet Kyoto targets or the economic and social effects of such action should find a wide audience for a long time. The implications of ageing – for health, pensions, incomes – are also going to be around for a long time; you can carve opt a market niche there. Immigration issues are growing in importance; Statcan, for one, has done some interesting work on the incomes of recent immigrants compared with the incomes of earlier waves of immigrants.

(Let me add a parenthetical note here. The author of one recent study was dismayed when his work was ignored by the news media the day it was released. His solution was to phone me and ask why. I couldn't speak for others, but in my own case, I had simply been too busy with other stories to notice his study and by the next day, it had slipped my mind. After his phone call, I took another look and made it the subject of my next column. The moral: There are times when pressure – or at least a timely reminder – works.)

Back to the good topics.

Productivity is a mystery to most people, but crucial to every country's economic success; studies that are user-friendly to the public should find readers. Income distribution is a perennial winner because everyone is interested in their income and whether they are doing better or worse than others. Health questions fall into the same category; my newspaper used national data to single out the fittest and fattest cities in Canada as part of a series on health. Agencies could initiate similar projects; all you have to do is pick subjects that will always be with us.

Another criterion is timeliness. Don't offer me papers based on data sets that end in 1995; they are not news unless you can very specifically connect them to a current phenomenon. Focus instead on subjects where the data are very current is you want the media to pay any attention.

There's another aspect of timeliness that's important – rapid response. Large organizations of any kind are usually quite dreadful at responding quickly to an opportunity because their decision-making process is simply too cumbersome. Someone has to spot the opportunity, decide that a response is called for, clear that decision with a superior, who then has to clear it with another superior, and so on. That's just to make the decision to act by doing an analysis that will become public. Then, of course, everyone up and down the line wants to review and edit whatever you are planning to publish. By the time it's done, the moment is long past.

I can think of one example of analysis that did get out quickly, but that could have had far more impact. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks occurred during the reference week for Statistics Canada's monthly labour force survey.
That week, our airports, like those in the United States, closed for several days, and firms located in tall downtown office towers in Toronto and Montreal gave a few days off to employees who were understandably nervous.

When the labour force survey was published in early October, the write-up included a short reference to the numbers of hours worked in September. Hours worked had fallen, notably in financial institutions and the offices of lawyers and accountants, who are the inhabitants of those tall downtown office towers. In the airline industry, some people worked shorter hours than normal (like pilots and flight attendants) while others worked longer hours than normal (because Canada took in many trans-Atlantic flights that were en route to the United States at the time of the attacks, but could not land there).

When I called for a few more details, I discovered that there existed a short analytical paper with more detail that Statscan was quite happy to send to me by fax. The result was that in addition to my story on the usual monthly job numbers, I wrote a separate piece on the Sept. 11 effect, a story that unfortunately was buried inside the section.

Statscan later published this short report in some of its other publications, but because bits of it had already been made public, it received little public attention. The was not a deep analysis; it was written on the fly under a tight deadline by someone who normally had a full plate of duties in getting the basic data assembled and ready for publication. It may have been a "quick-and-dirty", but it was a thoroughly competent and utterly fascinating piece of work.

Why, I wonder, didn't Statscan make better use of this study at the time? Why wasn't the whole thing published in the agency's daily data report? Why wasn't it thrust directly in the face of every media outlet in the country? If those kinds of steps had been taken, I'm pretty sure the study would have gotten high billing that night on the national TV newscast.

I don't know what sort of internal review process the paper went through, but I presume the review was a simple one – the paper was well within the normal bounds of analysis, it was impartial and it was professionally done, so it posed no threat to the agency's credibility. But if it had been released more prominently, it would have enhanced the agency's public credibility considerably.

So why did that not happen? I don't know the answer, but I suspect that a number of factors were at work. It probably didn't occur to the analysts that this might be as newsworthy as I thought it was. Obviously, they recognized that there would be some interest. Otherwise, they wouldn't have done the analysis in the first place or mentioned it in their overall release. But I wonder if they sought advice from their communications division: Hey, we've been able to pull from the routine data an interesting picture of jobs directly affected by the terrorist attacks; what do you think we should do with it?

This is always a tricky organizational issue – a kind of Catch-22 situation in which the analysts don't see the full news value of their work and the people who might understand its news value don't even know the work exists, so they cannot help make that basic decision on whether or not to tell the story to the public.

Maybe this is a two silos problem. In most organizations – public and private sector alike – there is a tendency for the communications function, and the communications people, to be treated as an afterthought. Too many think of their communications shop as a unit to deploy only for routine information. Worse, many expect their communications departments to fight fires that have been lit by the organization's senior people themselves, fires that could have been prevented. If this sketch fits your organization, then you have a problem, because iff you really want to communicate your material to a broader audience, you must incorporate that goal deeply into your operations on a day-to-day basis. That means making the communications function a central part of your thinking.

Let's go back to the very purpose of this meeting. To quote your own words back to you, you want to "use words to explain the numbers" because you want "to increase the visibility and role of statistics and to remain competitive in today's information saturated world."

Well, you simply cannot succeed at that unless you treat communications as a central part of your mandate and your communications people as people who should be used as a strategic asset.

Organizationally, that means this goal has to be enunciated by the top executives in the organization and reinforced – perhaps I should say enforced – with institutional changes to make it happen. It has to be a clear priority coming from the top, so that people down the line cannot slough off the effort to communicate better as one with no political backing within the organization.

In Canada, I think the single most successful federal department in recent years – in terms of getting its message out – has been the Finance Department. It's no accident that at Finance, the head of communications is an Assistant Deputy Minister who oversees the consultations that precede budgets, the packaging of the budgets themselves and the selling of the budgets after their release. Because it must build wide public support for its efforts, Finance has understood that communications is central to meeting its goals. Most organizations do not.

It has been less successful at publicizing its own research, perhaps because research is not as central to its mandate as the annual budget. I only learned of one such study because I had a chat with the deputy minister, who pointed the paper out to me and later sent me a copy. But there are others that don't even merit a press release.

Statistics Canada has its own recent example of what I regard as a superb communications effort – the release of the 2001 census results. That was pulled together by a team of people that included analysts and communications people, which delivered the data – in enormous detail – to Canadians through a combination of thematic write-ups, backed by huge volumes of data that the media and the public could find themselves at the agency's website. I can attest to the fact that my colleagues who covered the successive census releases found the process far easier and far more interesting than they expected. And most of them, I should note, are normally uncomfortable with raw data.

This is not easy. I suspect the two-silo problem is more acute in science organizations than it is in non-science organizations. More than most, you worry about the quality of your information and you worry that its credibility will be compromised if you try too hard to make your work too accessible to the public.

You wonder if you should use outsiders to help decide what issues to choose and how to handle specific research ideas. I'm a little wary here. I sit on A Statscan advisory committee on labour statistics that includes academic, business and union economists as well as me. I have to be careful of conflict of interest here. My editors and I have decided that it's fine for me to know in advance of broad areas that are being researched because that helps me in my work, but I am not short-changing readers because the research is usually not far enough along to be worth reporting. But if you are close to the point of publishing, you cannot turn to outside journalists for advice or input because the conflict then becomes very real and immediate, and this no longer tenable.

I'm not the best person to offer advice on how to solve all these problems within an organization. Journalists – especially writers – tend not to be very good at organizational issues of this kind. That's why we are writers, not editors. But to make this process work, you have to get some very competent communications people who can work within the constraints imposed by any science agency and you have to change the culture among the scientists who get nervous every time a small caveat or qualification goes missing as data moves from the agency to the public.

Surely, however, you can work out – issue by issue – compromises that allow the some popularizing of your data and analysis without sacrificing data quality or the seriousness with which your professional peers take your analysis. Surely there is a middle ground that allows for scientific and academic rigour on the one hand and clear prose aimed at lay readers on the other. It is simply a matter of making a commitment to finding that ground and doing what needs to be done to get there.

The scientists have to loosen up a bit so that the communications people can do their job. And their job is this: Tell me a story. Tell me about the world I live in. Tell me how your numbers help me understand what I see around me and on the TV news every night and in the newspapers the next morning. The scientists have some answers, but they have to let go of their material enough to let the communications people translate it into language that the public can understand.

This is difficult. That's why the task needs the full commitment of the organization's top management and the willingness to step on a few toes to make it all work. But popularizing your data is worth doing. Anything that helps ordinary people better understand the world around them is worth doing. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be doing the work I do.

Let me cast the answer in terms of your own self-interest. Every organization – whether public or private – needs a constituency of support in order to operate effectively. The more popular you make your data and the more you can tell people about the world they live in and how it works, then the broader will be your constituency. I leave it to you to figure out how that might help your own organization's position within your government, especially when it comes to getting a bigger budget.

Many speeches begin with a joke; I'll end with one – about two economists who are walking down a city street lined with low-rise apartment buildings when they hear a furious argument underway between two people who are leaning out of windows from buildings on opposite sides of the street. "They'll never settle that, of course," says one economist. "Why not?" asks his colleague. "Because," replies the first, "they're arguing from different premises."

Wordsmiths and number smiths are a bit like that. All you have to do is get the two out of their silos and working together towards a common goal. You'll need sticks as well as carrots, but the end is worth the effort.

Thank you.