

Cultural Obstacles to Statistical Storytelling

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Introduction

- Storytelling, journalism or merely improved communication?
- Some attitudes and skills are necessary
- Some obstacles have to be removed
- Cultural change and development
- Based on professional experience
- Based on statistical experience
- Differences and similarities?



Top Management Support

- Support for change may vary at different levels in the organization
- Top management support may be half-hearted
- Top management may not really want changes - just a nice surface
- Top management support has to be demonstrated - not only in strategy papers
- Especially in the event of conflict or disagreement



Internal Power Structure

- Organizations have formal and informal power structures
- Statisticians are the dominant profession
- Communication often receives low status
- Change may rub formal power structure the wrong way, generating a feeling of insecurity
- Serious resistance to change may arise
- Establishing positive feedback loops



Professional Traditions

- Traditional focus on the risk of misunderstanding and misuse
- Less focus on the risk of not understanding at all
- Lots of footnotes, technical terms, etc.
- Viewed as a necessity - not as a threat to understanding
- New focus on main conclusions and simplification
- Possible compromises?



The Huey-Dewey-&-Louie Syndrome

- Academic staff are often recruited from a narrow professional field
- Managers tend to recruit staff who resemble themselves
- NSIs may even recruit statisticians for communication jobs
- How do we expand the range of professional qualifications?



Professional Prejudice

- Stereotypes of other professions
- The closer, the more negative!
- But everybody scorns journalists...
- ...government institutions in particular
- Journalistic staff at an NSI may be treated with mistrust
- Meeting face-to-face, working together and getting results

External Orientation of Staff

- Statisticians write with professional colleagues in mind
- Statisticians often get feedback from other statisticians only
- They may not even believe that their readers don't understand!
- Organizing systematic feedback from actual readers

Insufficient Resources

- A large staff of “storytellers” is out of the question
- Statisticians will have to write most of the stories
- Dialog on equal terms will improve the skills of statisticians and communication professionals - but will take time
- Storytelling may be sacrificed if we have to concentrate on the “core business”

Barriers Against Communication Professionals

- Prejudice runs both ways
- Journalists may not want to work in such a boring institution!
- Establishing a positive feedback loop and improving the NSI's image

Traditional Attitudes of (Some) Users

- Some users may inadvertently expect statistics to be boring and hard to understand
- Some users may even lose confidence in statistics if they are easy to understand!
- We must establish different media and texts for different users
- Don't waste communication skills on users who don't want what we have to offer!



Conclusions and Perspective

- Communication quality is a rather recent invention in statistics
- In the NSIs of western countries, interest has been keen for quite a long time
- In developing countries, interest may be expected to increase fast
- Obstacles should be overcome - not bemoaned!
- Good communication is the only way to reach our real supervisor - the taxpayer...



**Cultural Change
Demands Will and Skill
- and a Lot of Patience!**