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Topic (i): How to make a story out of statistics. Recruiting and training of storytellers, and the creation of a favourable culture

**CULTURAL OBSTACLES TO STATISTICAL STORY-TELLING**

**Invited Paper**

Submitted by Statistics Denmark<sup>1</sup>

**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. This paper will *not* discuss whether statistical story-telling is advantageous to the dissemination of statistical information. We shall take as granted that this is indeed the case, and hence address the question: How is story-telling to be introduced in a statistical agency?
2. The problem is - at least – double-faced: Firstly, which attitudes, competences and skills are to be developed in order to successfully introduce story-telling in a statistical agency, and secondly which obstacles (if any) are to be removed, in order to succeed. In this paper I shall concentrate on the second part of this problem, knowing very well that the two parts are not really to be separated from each other. Will and skill are certainly indispensable, but to get acceptance you need to change and develop the existing culture.
3. The conclusions in this paper are based upon many years of professional experience in improving communication in different professional and governmental institutions. Over the last 4½ years I have been working as head of dissemination in Statistics Denmark - a national statistical institution which is probably not very different from other statistical institution in our part of the world. The problems and possibilities encountered here have been very similar to those I have encountered in other professional, governmental organizations.

**II TOP-MANAGEMENT SUPPORT**

4. An attempt to improve communication in a statistical institution (and indeed in any organization) will fail, if it is not actively supported by the top management. There may be a will to make changes in the organization - for example in the middle level management - but they will not succeed, if the will is not supported by top-management. As a consultant to government organizations I have several times witnessed top-management employ new and professional communication managers who - within one or two years - have had to throw in the towel, because the top management really didn't want any changes, just a nice surface. Hence, to introduce statistical story-telling the lack of real top-management support may be an important obstacle to overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Leon Østergaard, loe@dst.dk

5. Not only does top level management have to approve of the programme. They have to show actively that they do so - a paragraph in the strategy paper of the institution is not enough. This means, for example that in the case of conflict or disagreement between the traditional statisticians and the storytellers, the top-management must have the courage to actively decide in favour of the storytellers, when this is the right thing to do.

### **III. INTERNAL POWER STRUCTURE**

6. All organizations have a formal power structure, describing who is in charge of what and who is making which decisions. Apart from that, organizations also have an informal power structure, often based on the dominance of some professions over other professions. Let me give an example: When a communication department is first introduced in an organization, you will often find that the communication department enjoys low status in the organization, being regarded as an afterthought to the “real objectives” of the organization.

7. This goes for statistical institutions as well. The informal power structure will be based on the dominance of traditional statisticians over other professions, with which they may co-exist more or less peacefully. When new professional competences like communication skills are introduced in the organization, some of the statisticians may feel that the balance of power is rubbed, creating a sense of insecurity on the part of the organizational “establishment”. The statisticians may fear that their professional judgment is in danger of being overruled by other considerations - which may very well sometimes be the case.

8. The result can be serious informal resistance to change - even if it is decided by the formal management. Some statisticians may oppose improvements of dissemination only on the grounds that this will strengthen the position of the “intruding” communication professionals.

9. A possible way of overcoming or reducing this resistance is to make sure that the statisticians are made aware of the results of the improved dissemination. They should be informed when their figures are quoted more often in the press, in this way creating a positive feed-back loop.

### **IV. PROFESSIONAL TRADITIONS**

10. The professional tradition with national statistical organizations is that figures should be published in a way that makes misunderstanding or misuse impossible or as unlikely as possible. This means that in traditional statistical publications you will encounter a lot of footnotes, technical terms and references to methodology, while the conclusions normally are hidden in the last part of the publication. In other words: Focus is on the risk of misunderstanding, and not on the risk of not being understood at all!

11. This constitutes a serious barrier to story-telling, because in story-telling it is necessary to concentrate on the main conclusion, to simplify and to avoid unnecessary details. But when you discuss this with a statistician, it is very hard to convince him or her that an additional clarification or footnote to a text is a threat to understanding. For the statistician this extra detail has for many years been regarded not as a threat but as a necessity for understanding!

12. In practical life we try to solve this problem with a compromise. If we cannot agree with the statisticians on the omission of a footnote or clarification, we may agree to place it right at the end of the article or publication, preferably in a special box or something else that is not likely to interfere with normal reading.

## V. THE HEWEY-DEWEY-LOUIE-SYNDROME

13. Most professional organizations tend to recruit their academic staff from a rather narrow professional background. An example from my past experience: The Department of Justice is mainly staffed with lawyers, hence when a new job has to be done in the department they tend to recruit another lawyer for that job - even if it might make more sense to recruit from another profession to the job. And the opposite way around: I have worked in a government organization mainly staffed with engineers. When they decided to set up an internal law division, they recruited - not a lawyer but one more engineer!

14. On the same topic, it has been observed by organizational researchers that managers tend to recruit staff members with a strong resemblance to themselves: Same sex, same age, same education. This is what - at least in Denmark - is jokingly referred to as the "Hewey-Dewey-Louie syndrome".

15. Hence, when professional organizations for the first time decide to improve and professionalize their communication they tend to recruit persons similar to themselves to do the job. I have noticed this phenomenon in several governmental institutions, and Statistics Denmark is no exemption. When I took over the position as head of dissemination in the organization 4½ years ago, the Dissemination Centre counted almost 30 employees - not one of them had a formal communication background. But there were some good economists and statisticians amongst them, very enthusiastic to improve dissemination!

16. What do we do about it? For a start, in my own Dissemination Centre, we try to recruit a broad range of communication professionals, from a broad range of educational institutions, of different sex and ages. This increases the possibility for the statistical staff of meeting different communication professionals in everyday work, and this - hopefully - will increase mutual respect.

## VI. PROFESSIONAL PREJUDICE

17. All professionals are carrying stereotypes of other professions. In my experience, the closer and more competitive the professions, the more negative the stereotypes tend to be. Some examples are the stereotypes doctors carry versus dentists and vice versa, lawyers versus economists, engineers versus architects and so on. However, there is one profession scorned by most academic professions - especially the scientific ones - and that is the journalistic profession. The general prejudice goes that journalists are only trying to vulgarize true knowledge, getting a big headline and - if possible - misunderstanding the message.

18. In my experience, the attitude to journalists is generally negative in many government institutions as well. This may be founded on a single negative experience which may have occurred years ago, where the institution felt itself exposed in the press in an unfair way.

19. To improve statistical story-telling however, you have to use journalists or at least journalistic skills. The first journalist in Statistics Denmark was employed four years ago, and this was greeted with quite some mistrust from some of the statisticians. Some even changed their normal walking path through the offices in order to get a glimpse of this strange creature.

20. The way to overcome prejudice is of course the same as above. Let people meet each other - preferably face to face - and let them show that they can contribute in a positive way to the success of the organization.

## VII. PROFESSIONALLY SKEW EXTERNAL ORIENTATION

21. In their everyday work statisticians in general do not have "ordinary" people or journalists in mind. When they write, they have quite another readership in mind, primarily their professional colleagues in the statistical institution or in other institutions. When they get feedback, they primarily get it from other statisticians who may approve or disapprove of what they are writing. Hence, they will often

be surprised when we tell them that the readers will not understand what they are writing. Sometimes, we have to argue at length over their use of some statistical term in the text, because they simply have another kind of readership in mind.

22. The only way to overcome this cultural barrier is to systematically arrange feedback to the writers from other groups of readers than those traditionally met. This can be done by means of internal courses or workshops, where statisticians meet more “normal” readers.

### **VIII. LACK OF RESOURCES**

23. All statistical institutions note that they lack resources - Statistics Denmark is no exception. We are a small NSI, even compared with countries of the same size. In the ideal world, we might consider employing a staff of “storytellers” to get the message through, but in the real world this is totally out of the question for lack of resources.

24. Instead, we have to rely on the statisticians to produce most of the texts in the organization, and then finish these texts in cooperation with communication professionals (including journalists) in the Dissemination Centre. If the dialogue between the statisticians and the communication professionals works well, this approach has the added advantage that both parties become wiser in the process. The statisticians producing still better texts, and the journalists getting a better understanding of statistics.

25. However, it takes time to write short and understandable - more time than to write at length and unintelligible. When resources are scarce - as they are in statistical agencies - they tend to be allocated to what is seen as “core business” and the time spent on improving the quality of dissemination may be cut down.

### **IX. BARRIERS WITH THE COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS**

26. Professional prejudice runs both ways. Some journalists are convinced that statistics are boring and unintelligible, and hence they will not apply for job in a national statistical institution. When we first advertised for a journalist almost four years ago, we had to have this in mind and hence phrased the advertisement: “Journalist to statistics? Don’t be surprised!”

27. These prejudices have changed in recent years, however. We have been working hard to improve understanding and relations with the Danish press, and today the general opinion among journalists is more like “Statistics? There must be an awful lot of good stories hiding here”. By the way - our last advertisement for a journalist resulted in 78 applicants.

### **X. TRADITIONS WITH (SOME OF) THE USERS**

28. A final barrier that might be mentioned has to do with some of the users of statistics. By our traditional ways of dissemination we may have educated the users to expect statistics being boring and hard to understand. Some of these users may react against better dissemination and story-telling by losing confidence in the figures, when they are not accompanied by footnotes and technical terms.

29. The simple solution to this problem is to have different media for your different target groups. Some news media may be targeted for the general public and some for the professionals who prefer the boring way of dissemination. In the real world, it shouldn’t present a problem to reserve some channels for un-mediated information. Scarcity of resources makes it impossible to put communication skills into all of your channels anyway.

### **XI. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVE**

30. In a historical context, communication quality is a rather late addition to the production and dissemination of statistics. In our part of the world most statistical institutions have been working to

improve communication for quite a long time. There are however differences in the levels of ambitions and success. In the developing countries of the world, interest in dissemination skills may be expected to increase markedly in the years to come. A lot of national statistical institutions may be expected to introduce programs of improved statistical communication, including story-telling.

31. The purpose of this paper is certainly not to discourage improved story-telling by statistical institutions. On the contrary! Good communication is the only way to reach ordinary taxpayers, who in the long run decide the fate of any governmental institution.

32. To introduce statistical story-telling you need the will and the skill. Both are indispensable, but this is not enough. You have to be aware of the cultural barriers to change in any organization in order not to despair. Cultural change demands will, skill and .....patience!