

**UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Work Session on Dissemination of Statistical Commentary
(Geneva, Switzerland, 4-5 December 2003)

Topic (iii): Dissemination of statistical commentary and stories. How to get them through to the user

STORYTELLING. DISSEMINATION OF STATISTICAL COMMENTARY AND STORIES

Invited Paper

Submitted by Statistics Sweden¹

How to get through to the user

1. All areas of statistics have target groups that are interested in their own specific area. Most likely, the general public finds statistical information the same as any other news item published in newspapers or broadcasted on radio and television.
2. A good deal of the statistics from statistics offices is reported in the media. A smaller amount results in news stories or forms the basis for good stories or reports.
3. To receive the trust of the general public and maintain neutrality, interpretations of statistical results have by tradition been left to the users. However, journalists have a somewhat complex situation here. Journalists are usually
 - In a hurry.
 - Slightly knowledgeable in many areas while statisticians are very knowledgeable in one area.
 - Lacking space for their coverage.
4. As a result, journalists seldom have time to study a complicated press release without clear news features.
5. To improve the conditions so the media will report good stories based on statistical results, a few rules should be observed.

Content that is appealing

6. Many people, including journalists, regard statistics texts as boring. This is probably because the texts are so full of facts and contain a lot of numerical information. Statisticians want to express themselves precisely in an objective and neutral way. Explanations, comments and analyses run the risk of containing evaluations. This could lead to accusations of taking a political stance. So instead, texts are heavy reading.

¹ Prepared by Per-Åke Bladh (perake.bladh@scb.se).

7. Tables, diagrams and graphs should be used as illustrations for the texts. But often, the texts are only a verbal repetition of what is illustrated in the tables, diagrams and graphs.
8. Journalists are good at explaining complicated situations in a simple way. In turn, it is easier for journalists if statistical reports are served in an appealing and uncomplicated way. The probability to gain the attention of the mass media for the statistics is increased.
9. One way to make the contents more interesting could be to report on time series. This method describes the historical development and usually tells much more than a single figure that only reflects a snapshot. Time series serve as a better basis to tell a story.
10. It is important for the media that readers, listeners or viewers can relate and identify with what they read, see or hear. That is why journalists try to personify and individualise general information. If the Consumer Price Index has risen dramatically, trade journals and economic publications report on this increase using clear-cut figures. The media reporting to the general public complements this with a description of how this increase affects individual citizens; how much food prices have increased, how much more expensive living costs have become, etc.
11. Thus, the first conclusion is to focus on the interesting news points and chances will increase that the story will be reported in the media.

Written in plain language

12. Like all other scientific fields, statistics has its own terminology with defined concepts and precise meanings for those in the field. It is practical to use these concepts when describing a survey or reporting results that other statisticians or experts will study. Seasonally adjusted, significance levels, confidence intervals are a few examples of technical statistical terms. Like most people who deal with scientific matters, statisticians have difficulty describing their survey results without using technical terminology, which to them is crystal clear. For those outside of the field, this terminology is instead an obstacle for understanding the text.
13. Thus, the use of scientific terminology can ruin even the best story. It is essential to use plain language. Our press office should be able to help those statisticians who find it difficult to simplify their language. Chances of getting the story out are much greater if it is written in plain, everyday language.
14. Conclusion: Use plain language and avoid technical terminology.

Local connection

15. Besides radio and television, there are only a few newspapers that are spread nationwide. In Sweden, around 155 of the some 165 daily newspapers are local or regional ones. These newspapers place high news value on events and information concerning the local area. "News" is sometimes defined as something that is "close to time and space". Whenever statistical information can be broken down into a regional level and distributed in the local newspapers, the publicity will be greater than if only national figures are available.
16. So, bear in mind that national figures are more interesting for national media, while information concerning local areas is preferred by those particular local newspapers.

Good timing

17. A first-rate news article is more likely to be reported in several media if it is distributed at the right point in time. Naturally, this good timing depends on a number of circumstances.

18. In general, news from the morning papers and television is best distributed in the mornings. Journalists at the daily newspapers then have all afternoon and evening to process the material, do research and conduct interviews. Television has time to process the material, make it visual and still fit it into the newscast during evening prime time.

19. The above does not apply to Internet newspapers and other Internet news media, which can usually receive information anytime during the day and quickly publish it.

20. Many national statistics offices have also adapted their dissemination of news information to well-known conditions of a journalist's normal working day. The target group of journalists needs to be handled with care.

21. All statistics are spread as soon as they are produced. Statistics should be made available as quickly as possible. Publication of statistics must not be delayed so as to obtain more publicity. Therefore, most statistics offices issue a publishing plan in advance, with the exact dates and times when results will be published.

22. But there is another important aspect of timing: In connection with current events, relevant statistics can be highlighted. The Office of National Statistics in the UK uses this technique.

23. Our press office often receives inquiries from journalists that relate to current events. For example, when the Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh was murdered, we received many questions on the number of murders in Sweden per year.

24. Statistics Sweden often publishes a good deal of factual information simultaneously with current events. For example:

- When the general elections were held in Sweden, Statistics Sweden website included information about the election process, previous election results, number of immigrants eligible to vote, and number of first-time voters are some examples.
- Statistics Sweden followed the same procedure during the Euro referendum campaign earlier this autumn and published related information on other referendums.

25. Some of the media used this type of information in fact boxes, while others used the material for background descriptions and news articles.

26. Previously published information can receive renewed value if it is published again in a current context. At the start of the school year, Statistics Sweden once again distributed previously published information on the number of six year olds in Sweden starting school for the first time. Many newspapers reported this information. More reporters asked for the figures concerning their own communities.

27. Just before the Christmas holiday a few years ago, our press office collected some facts relating to the season at hand. These facts were included in a brief press release (See appendix: "Christmas extra"). Nearly half of all Swedish newspapers reported about the press release, adding other similar stories to the information. This Christmas press release did not contain any new or unknown information. All the presented facts were previously available and some had been published separately. However, this press release probably received so much attention because it was sent at the right point in time when the contents suited the media's high priority list.

28. Journalists often regard statistical information from Statistics Sweden as rather dull. While the information in the Christmas extra press release was in itself correct, this press release gained extra attention because it deviated from the traditionally scientific tone. Using a lighter tone when presenting factual information can function well, as long as it is not done too often.

29. Timing is important to capture the interest of journalists writing stories on statistics.

Methods of spreading information to the media

30. All national statistics offices produce a wealth of interesting information about the society we live in. A distinguishing characteristic for all statistics offices is that they work in many different ways to get information out both to the users and the general public. It doesn't matter how interesting or important the statistics information is if it doesn't reach users and the general public.

31. You could say:

*Statistics offices collect **data**.*

*This **data** is processed to **information** and distributed.*

*Information becomes **knowledge** at the recipient side.*

32. Processing, refinement and compilation of data does not become knowledge at the recipient side unless the middle link succeeds in getting the information out.

33. Discussions have been held at UNECE's "Work Sessions on Statistical Output for Dissemination to Information Media". UNECE has arranged a compilation of best practices on how to distribute statistical information to the media. This compilation will be available in a handbook coming out in autumn 2003.

34. Statistical information and statistical stories can be distributed either through the same traditional channels or other newer channels. Comments on both methods follow.

The website

35. In recent years the website has been the main channel to spread statistical information. Data can be quickly published and made available to each and everyone. This means that not only journalists have access to news information.

36. The advantage of presenting your own stories and news on the website is that you yourself decide on the formulation and method of presentation. The information reaches the general public before journalists have edited and processed the material. Distortion and misunderstanding are minimised when information is written in a journalistic way, i.e. news-oriented with the important parts at the beginning in plain, everyday language.

37. The UK's home of official statistics, ["National Statistics Online"](#) sets a good example for this approach.

Press releases

38. The most common way statistics offices around the world spread the news is via the media. The media serves as an important intermediary of statistical information to the general public. As a rule, contacts with the media are made via press releases in one form or another. Press releases can either contain results from particular areas of statistics or include compilations of results from several areas, such as Canada's "The Daily".

39. This traditional way of reaching out to the media can even be used to convey a story or give basic information to journalists who can use statistics as a starting point for a story.

40. Press releases are published and spread in several different ways. The quickest and nowadays dominating channel is to present them on the website. Most statistics offices do this on their homepage or under the heading "Pressroom", "News" etc.

41. Sending news information via email to the mass media is another common way. The email should include a link to the website so that the reader can obtain the complete news text.
42. Many newsrooms still want all news information via telefax. Although perhaps considered obsolete today, the news editor may have continuous monitoring of the inflow of telefaxes but not for email.
43. Press releases are sent via the postal system only in exceptional cases, such as when the press release is a publication that is sent for a review. But this type of press release would hardly serve as a basis for storytelling.

Other publications

44. Statistical results are usually published in news releases as soon as they are available. Most statistics offices aspire to quickly publish information. It is of utmost importance to rapidly publish market-sensitive information and data on economic indicators. Surveys on welfare and other living conditions should also be published to describe the "now" situation. In contrast, more complex descriptions of this area are better suited for reports in other publications.
45. "Social welfare" is a periodical issued by Statistics Sweden four times a year. "Social welfare" includes in-depth stories within noteworthy areas of social welfare. Information is presented in running text in a completely different way than in news releases. The publication is often used as a source of inspiration for journalists who write their own reports within a particular area.
46. To gain even further attention on stories published in "Social welfare", separate press releases are sometimes published with a short summary of the articles. The information thus becomes well spread in the media.

Individual journalists

47. When disseminating statistics, it is vital that information is made available for all the media and other interested parties at the same time. This is especially true for market-sensitive economic information.
48. But after the statistics have been published, people at our press office or other statisticians are free to contact journalists directly. If a press release has not been mentioned in those newspapers that normally report the information, it is a good idea to contact these newspapers and remind them that the statistics office has published information. Either the newspaper has intentionally not published the information, or the news editor may have simply forgotten to do so. By contacting the newspaper, you can either get valuable information on why the paper chose not to publish the information, or the opportunity to attract their attention to what has been distributed. If they merely missed the news, perhaps they will decide to process and publish it the next day, which was of course the intention in contacting the newspaper.
49. A successful press function must build up its own network. By studying how the most respected and influential mass media reports statistical information, the press office gets to know the people working at the media and can find out which journalists specialise in what. It is valuable to know which subject areas are monitored and reported on by particular journalists. When new statistics have been published, these journalists can be supplied with basic information and background material on their respective subject area. This helps them to make good reports.

Writing articles in newspapers

50. Statisticians often possess unique knowledge about their particular subject area. But to avoid losing credibility and maintain the independence and neutrality of the statistics office, statisticians rarely give comments or evaluations of their information in the media. That is why the media relies on bank economists to comment on GDP development, family economists to explain implications of housing prices etc.

51. Many newspapers provide column space for debate articles or feature articles from external columnists. This could give statisticians an opportunity to describe social development in a current context. Unfortunately, few statisticians feel they have the time, interest or ability to take part in public debate with these kinds of articles, even though it would be a good way to get a good statistical story published.

Summary

52. Chances for greater publicity for statistical stories increase if they are:

- Spread in processed form - analysed and commented on – rather than in table form.
- Reproduced in the form of an interesting story.
- Expressed in plain language.
- Distributed to the media at the right point in time.
- Spread through different channels depending on the character of the contents.



Christmas extra

- [Danish Christmas trees in many Swedish homes](#)
- **Turnover for toys in December accounts for over 25 per cent of yearly turnover**
- [Price for Christmas ham last year was below SEK 50 per kilo](#)
- [Many celebrate their birthdays on Christmas Eve](#)

Christmas trees

During the final quarter of last year, Sweden imported at least 49 392 Christmas trees from Denmark. This figure is from the official statistics, and does not include the number of trees imported by private persons, smaller enterprises and Christmas tree dealers. Thus it is likely that more than 49 300 Swedish homes had Danish Christmas trees last year.

There are about 4.3 million households in Sweden. It is not known how many of these households have Christmas trees.

Further information: Lisbeth Svennberg, telephone 08-506 944 26.

Toy trade

In December 2000, the toy trade had 26.7 per cent of all yearly sales. Other businesses with high December sales are gold and jewellery with 19.5 per cent of yearly sales in December.

CDs and video cassettes (18.8 per cent), together with glass, chinaware and electrical goods (18.6 per cent) also have high sales in December.

Dispensing chemists and retail sales of spectacles do not show any particular increase in December.

The month of December usually accounts for 12 per cent of annual retail trade compared to 8 per cent for the other months.

Further information: Daniel Lennartsson, telephone 019-17 64 29.

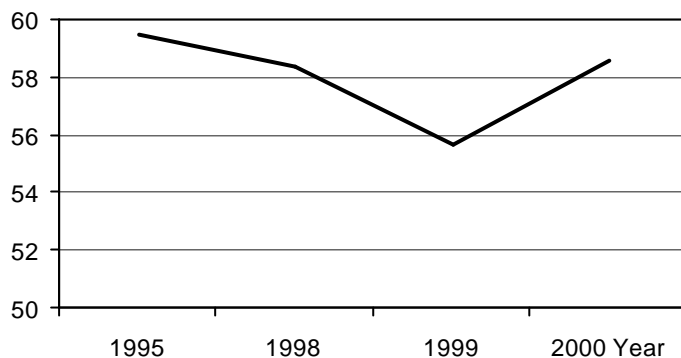
Price comparisons

In December, the average price for 1 kilo of boneless **Christmas ham** was:

1998 – SEK 44.58

1999 – SEK 48.66

2000 – SEK 49.89



Further information on prices: call 08-506 944 68.

Children

No figures are available on how many people believe in Santa Claus. But in the middle of December this year, there were 635 587 children under the age of 7.

Birthday on Christmas Eve

Last year on Christmas Eve, 182 children were born in Sweden.

In total, there are 20 585 people in Sweden who have their birthdays on 24 December.

Further information on population: call 019-17 69 00.



Please state Statistics Sweden as source when citing information from this press release.