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Topic: Communicating statistics in the information age

MONITORING AND REACTING IN THE BLOGOSPHERE AND OTHER ONLINE MEDIA

Submitted by Statistics Denmark[1]

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   Monitoring the media is an important task for most companies and organisations of a certain size. Media watch is nothing new, and professional companies have specialised in keeping the media under watch. At least from our point of view – the viewpoint of a national statistical institution in a democracy – media watch serves two main purposes: It enables the organisation and the communication staff to learn and to react.

2.   When we read about Statistics Denmark and see the use of our figures in the media, we get a good impression of the effects of our work; we get to know which statistics are extensively used in the media, and which are rarely quoted; and we learn from praise and criticism. Measuring the visibility of the organisation and the specific statistics in the media, especially the news media, is an aspect of learning. In the case of misunderstandings and misuse, we are able to ask for corrections, and when we have committed an error in the published data, we can trace it, apologise, and ask for correction. Media watch is a key tool for working with our credibility.

3.   In that view, it was a logical development when Statistics Denmark recently started monitoring weblogs and other media on the word wide web. The new thing is that we have extended the media we watch to all weblogs and thousands of websites. This paper will describe and discuss the experiences of the extended media watch. The paper will also go through some cases where we have reacted either in time or too late, and it will eventually claim that monitoring the new media is a precondition for developing an up-to-date crisis management.

II.   MONITORING THE BLOGOSPHERE – AND REACTING

4.   The world wide web opened up in the beginning of the nineties, and the invention of the weblog – abridged to *blog* – followed only a couple of years later (read more details at, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Wide_Web). However, at least in a Danish context, it was not until a few years ago that the blog phenomenon became widely known and used.

5.   A blog can shortly be described as a website or a subsite where any kind of text and visual material in reverse chronological order can be published; the technology is simple, and the blog can be owned (published) by an individual, a group of individuals, or an organisation. The writer of the entry is called the blogger, and it is normally possible for the reader to comment on the entry, thus making the blog a "social" media – a media of interaction. Seen as a genre, it is typical of the texts that they are generally short, informal, personal, and filled with links.

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6.   As blogs are published on the World Wide Web, it is easy to search the so-called "blogosphere". Google is the most widely used search engine on the web, and it offers the feature Google Blog Search (http://blogsearch.google.com/). Though far from perfect, according to our tests, this is the best search tool for blogs, because it finds more blog entries searching for "Danmarks Statistik" and "Statistics Denmark" (remember the quotation marks) than any other tool for blog search, e.g. Technorati. The number of search hits, though, is also the Achilles' heel for Google Blog Search, because many of the hits are, for instance, journalistic news and job advertisements and have nothing to do with blogs. This gives the user some extra work, but still it is much better to find too much than too little – in particular seen from a crisis management perspective.

7.   With Google's tool you can search specific periods, for instance, the last hour, the last 24 hours, or the last 7 days, so fortunately, you don't have to go through all the hits for the last years every time you want an update. At Statistics Denmark we have automated the process of using the blog search engine. That is, we have set up our own server to pick new hits from Google Blog Search several times a day. The results are entered into our own database, the "Blog Base", in the form of metadata such as title, link, blog name, and publishing time. The full blog entries in their original html-versions are saved in an offline archive; this is done because some blogs or blog entries may disappear or are edited, thereby ruining our possibilities of documenting and learning.

8.   Our blog monitoring system was developed last year by the author and a database expert in our Dissemination Centre. The press section in the Dissemination Centre has the regular job of surveying the new hits and communicating on interesting blog entries with the rest of the organisation. This includes decisions on whether and how to react in cases of misuse, misunderstandings and criticism. Let us look at a few examples:

9.   *The town-size case:* In April last year a blog criticized the statistics of the population in urban areas. Two towns had grown to more than 40,000 inhabitants in the statistics, a limit that was of political importance, because it allowed them to build large shopping centres downtown. The definition of an urban area gives some room for interpretation, and the blog claimed that Statistics Denmark had been under political pressure for re-interpreting the size of the town. Two days later a reader commented: "If this is true, it is abuse of power of the worst sort. Send it to a journalist immediately!" Apparently this was done by the blogger: In July the story hit the front page of *Politiken*, one of the most influential Danish newspapers.

10.   Such a story, well-documented and even revealing internal disputes on the interpretation in our Population Division, may damage the reputation of Statistics Denmark. Fortunately, the newspaper never followed up on the story. Careful reading of blog entries might have made it possible to take early steps to prevent the damage – and this was the way we learnt to take blogs very seriously. (You can find the blog entry at http://talbanken.wordpress.com/2007/04/17/snyd-pa-v%c3%a6gten-i-midtjylland/)

11.   *The nationalist case:* Having learnt this lesson, we didn't hesitate in the next case to comment on a blog that misused some of our figures. The extreme right is, at least in Denmark, very active in the blogosphere. They are very occupied with immigrants' issues, and they like to document their attitudes with quotations and statistics. In general, they are critical towards the official definition of immigrants, and they argue that Denmark is being overrun by Muslims. In August, the leader of The Danish Association (Den Danske Forening) misquoted some figures from Statistics Denmark on fertility among immigrants from non-Western countries, and we simply corrected him in a comment on the blog.

12.   We had checked the facts with our Population Division and wrote the answer in a neutral and polite style. We knew that our answer might cause reactions, and for sure a lady called our figures "some undocumented crap", but at least the misquoted figures didn't spread. (The original blog has disappeared, but you may find the entry and the comments at http://danmark.wordpress.com/2007/08/22/danmarks-statistik-aktiv-med-handicap-paa-20-aar/).

13.   *The inquiry protection case:* 700,000 Danes have informed the Central Population Register that they want to be "protected" from investigators' inquiries. This is a problem for Statistics Denmark and other institutions. To put focus on the problem we published a story about it in our web magazine (http://www.dst.dk/OmDS/BagTal/Arkiv/24-01-08-flytteblanket-truer-statistik-og-forskning.aspx). The strategy worked well, and the press wrote extensively about the problem. Unfortunately, a blogger took the

opposite position to the news, and cheerfully told about how he had been inspired to contact the authorities in order to get protected. The head of our Methods Division wrote a short comment, correcting some misunderstandings, and put a link to our web magazine article at the end of it. (See blog entry and comment at http://www.capac.dk/wordpress/?p=2497).

14.   Until now only one blog case, "the town-size case", has given us real problems, and hopefully we have learnt the lesson from it. In one case, the nationalist one, our comment has led to a harsh reaction. In another case a blogger noted that staff from Statistics Denmark had visited her blog, and she got a bit scared, fearing there might be problems with copyright on our data in her entry; she mailed us, and I answered back, that her use of our statistics was absolutely all right. Still, this taught us that sometimes the watchers themselves get watched in the blogosphere.

15.   The quantity of blog entries that mention Statistics Denmark is not large. In February, for instance, there were 16 such entries. Roughly speaking, we probably have to comment on a blog once every second month. Thus, most of the work consists in keeping an eye on the blogs and spreading information internally about interesting – or even funny – entries. This is a way to educate the organisation on this new media.

16.   The Dissemination Centre presented a paper about the blog phenomenon to Statistics Denmark's internal Dissemination Committee in 2006. The paper discussed the possibilities of an external Statistics Denmark blog and gave examples of other authorities having blogs. The Committee did not think that the blog media had "matured", but accepted a closed dialogic forum for researchers on our website. Since then, the Dissemination Centre has tried to spread information on the use and importance of blogs in the rest of the organisation. We have also developed an internal blog (BOB) to discuss interesting blog entries; it is mostly used by the communication staff and gives us some experience with blogging on a regular basis.

III.   MONITORING THE WEB – AND REACTING

17.   Monitoring the printed press and the national radio and TV news is very well organised in Denmark, where this service is offered by a few competing enterprises. The use of monitoring is very common in larger Danish companies and organisations. Though, news nowadays is, generally, published earlier on the web than in the traditional kinds of media, the development of web monitoring has been slow.

18.   As more and more news media covering both traditional media and web work from a "web-first strategy", the inertia in both the supply and the demand for web monitoring is hard to explain. Maybe some of the organisations have rigorous goals for rising numbers of press hits in the traditional media? And maybe the managements and the communication bosses still regard the radio, TV, and the printed papers as the "real" media?

19.   In the last months, Statistics Denmark has tried out two web monitoring services that focus on the Danish media. Though, they are not developed into perfection, they are still good tools. They are based on very big media lists that include much more than the traditional media and their web extensions: a couple of thousands websites from organisations, unions, institutions, ministries, local authorities, and some larger companies.

20.   When Statistics Denmark is mentioned in one of these websites, we receive an e-mail shortly after. This e-mail normally contains the full text of the article and a link to the website. In February, we received 450 of such e-mails, some of them containing more than one article or more than one link to the same story in different news media, giving a total number of web hits of probably about 750. This should be compared to the average monthly number of hits in the traditional media, which is around 650.

21.   Statistics Denmark always releases new figures at 9.30 am. Most of the web articles using our figures are published between, roughly speaking, 9.35 and 11.30 am. This indicates that the journalists who pass on our figures have had very short time to edit the statistical news. For practical purposes you might divide the web hits in the fast ones and the slow ones.

22.   *The fast ones* are those that are made very quickly by the journalist on the basis of either our own newsletter or a version of the same story, edited by a news service. A fast spreading story can also begin with a journalist independently using our figures in a news article that rapidly spreads to other websites. *The slow ones* are more likely stories which stem from organisations and are written by communication people or journalists who work for these organisations. Let us look at two examples:

23.   *The bankruptcy case:* Reacting quickly to the fast web news is essential. In April, we published the monthly statistics on bankruptcies, and we made an error in the text in the newsletter (*Nyt fra Danmarks Statistik, "News from Statistics Denmark"*): We wrote that the number of bankruptcies had *risen* compared to the same month last year – it should have been *fallen*, and that was possible to see in the table at the end of the newsletter.

24.   We used the web monitoring service to check if our error had spread. This time we had been lucky. The story had spread to around 20 media, but the error had not. This was because the major news service (the Danish equivalent to Reuters, called Ritzau) had corrected the error on its own initiative, and most of the media rely on that service. Thus, we were able to concentrate on communicating with the few media that had spread our error – instead of having to disturb the entire press with our correction.

25.   *The union case:* Reacting with care and consideration is more important than the speed of reaction when it comes to the "slow" web news. But, of course, also a story that is not hot news may spread to other media, as we shall see in this example. A major Danish labour union (3F) claimed in a November article on their own website (http://forsiden.3f.dk/article/20071126/NYHEDER/71126016/2165/NYHEDER) that the Danish Employers' Confederation (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening) was using wrong figures on the development in wages and salaries. Large groups of public servants – a representative of the union claimed in the article – were being underpaid with up to 2 per cent, because Statistics Denmark had committed an error in the statistics on wages and salaries back in 1997 and 1998. According to the article, Statistics Denmark should even have admitted that expensive error.

26.   In this case, we asked for a correction, and it was quickly brought at the end of the article where it can still be found. Some of the unions work together on this kind of news, and the error had spread to other union sites. We were able to get corrections on all these sites, but we did not have time to prevent the union representative from repeating her erroneous – and political – use of statistics in the national radio the same evening.

IV.   AVOIDING CRISES – AND KEEPING UP CREDIBILITY

27.   As I claimed in the introduction, media watch is a key tool for working with credibility. This is true no matter what kind of media we consider. What makes monitoring the web media and the blogs special is the speed aspect. Potentially stories can spread very fast, making it a huge challenge to deal with errors, misunderstandings, manipulation, and criticism.

28.   For those organisations not keeping an eye on the blogosphere *blogs* can be dangerous, and a lot of comments and new entries can be written before the organisation hears about it. If you do not monitor *the web media* you can be quite sure to hear of a news story when it has spread – probably the story will be found in the printed newspapers next day. Monitoring the web news, fast or slow, will make your work considerably easier, if done before misunderstandings spread too much. Monitoring blogs and websites may limit the damage that can be done to the image of any organisation – and certainly to a national statistical institution, which has its credibility as the bottom line of its work.

29.   At Statistics Denmark we have not yet developed a complete strategy of crisis management. Nevertheless, in the Dissemination Centre we are convinced that there can be no professional crisis management without web and blog monitoring as central tools. A crisis will normally spread through the media. Of course, you cannot solve a crisis just by doing media work, but monitoring the media will convey the organisation with a clear picture of its scale.

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