

**UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

UNECE Work Session on the Communication of Statistics
(30 June – 2 July 2010, Paris, France)

- (i) Getting the numbers across in ways that external audiences understand

LOST IN STATISTICS?

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The access numbers for statistical websites are increasing every year in Germany – as they are all over the world. We have our established customers, the experts who we have well served for years already. In addition, there are other customers who get to us by chance or more and more through search engines – they have neither used our data yet nor are they acquainted with statistical terms and methods. While, at the beginning, our website was a new service offering existing customers faster access to our data, it has now become an information portal for economic and social developments which is accessed by millions of people. This means that, first, our degree of dissemination has sharply increased and, second, the customer structure has changed. While, in the past, we made our data available mainly to experts, we are now forced to adjust our basic range of data offered to that larger group of customers.

2. The development of publishing via the statistical web pages has been similar to that of printed publications, but it has been much faster. At first, statisticians filled the databases with figures and the presentation focused on accessibility, statistical methods and quality. In a second step we added text-based publications (optimized for paper publishing) which were downloaded as pdf files and their number of requests was much higher than that of printed publications. But how to serve now millions of users who know only little about us and our data? Basically, we simply transferred our print-based publication system to the electronic system without anticipating that searching information would dramatically change on, and through the internet.

II. NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR OUR DATA

A. Information must be understandable to the “masses” who get to our pages through links, search machines or by chance

3. The language of statistics is neutral, serious, and full of nouns. Texts describe what the figures mean, using an observing perspective. This is expressed by a passive style. We are not used to mention the actors themselves. Active language attaches everyone, is interesting and without distance.

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4. Instead of naming the actors, we support the meaning of the figures by surrounding them with definitions and delimitations. Consequently, instead of saying “About 7 million foreigners lived in Germany in 2008”, we produce sentences like “The Central Register of Foreigners, at the end of 2008, showed a total of approximately 6.73 million persons in Germany who have only a foreign citizenship”.
5. We have to simplify texts, replace technical terms and use fewer figures. In explanatory texts, it is essential to give context information. Instead of describing results, we should focus on explaining them, putting them into a relevant context, settling contradictions and preventing misinterpretations.
6. Many internet users do not understand us when we use our statistical jargon - or they simply find our texts boring.



B. Most internet users are interested in a topic rather than in a statistics

7. Just think of how you do research on the internet yourself: You enter a term into a search machine and have a glance at the list of websites offered. Therefore it is crucial what topics we use to address the general public. They are a critical factor for whether internet users are interested in us. We must select topical issues and treat them with the data we can contribute. For that purpose, it is necessary to select more specific results and place them where they are used at the moment. In case of very specific data (for example, topics that are seldom demanded), we should also have the courage not to publish them through our top channels and, instead, to disseminate them only to selected target groups.

8. We must make the transfer of linking statistical results with the areas of life of the people. If we intend to publish data by topics, we have to intensify the linking of data from different statistics. We must show the users what can be expressed by our data.

C. For laymen, many things are interesting as long as they are easy to understand

9. As statisticians, we are acquainted with many data and connections from the various statistics. As we deal with the figures every day, we forget that even a single figure may be an interesting piece of information for laymen. The internet is the ideal platform to present key figures or individual results from statistics in a concise manner. This requires, however, that we carefully select what we present: Where is an interesting trend, what poses questions to us as dissemination specialists, what is worth mentioning? We should more often have a look at the detailed levels of statistics, where the figures are quite close to people’s life, where everyday products or living conditions are concerned.

D. As, on average, internet users do stay very shortly on any website, a picture says more than a thousand words

10. In the context of ever growing floods of information, we need ways of conveying our contents; an important way, apart from simplifying and shortening the information, is visualising it. Charts and tables must be easy to understand at a glance, we have to rank our results, put them into context, simplify and – above all – reduce them. Animated charts and interactive applications use the technology and support the communication of our figures.

11. What is the visual language we use? Photographs – if properly selected – are better remembered than any text. Advertising campaigns make use of that phenomenon. We should try publishing more of our information in a visual manner.



E. Social media

12. Facebook, Twitter and Co. are new communication platforms and it is worth considering whether they should be served. So far, they have hardly been used to disseminate our data. We should carefully examine where and how official statistics should be placed in those forums. In any case, the integration must be done systematically and – despite the decentralised organisation of those forums – maintenance must be centralised. This is because quality assurance of information disseminated in that way is the biggest challenge here. Therefore, a first step could be automated linkage, for example, of press news or a further dissemination of information that has already been published elsewhere.

Interested? For selected examples of Website applications please go to “prices” on www.destatis.de.