

“How public policy statistics can play a role in handling disinformation”. A common approach.

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Abstract

Who could ever have imagined just a few years ago that official statistics would come under attack from... *alternative facts*, or even deliberate disinformation? However, these days it is happening, and we have seen it even more during the Covid-19 crisis.

In the foggy landscape that has arisen around a quantity of data, facts and statistics that has increased exponentially, deception also seems to be able to stake a claim with impunity. But particularly in an age of social media and 'bubbles', polarization in the social debate, conspiracy thinking and deliberate disinformation, good use of data is more important than ever. In many countries, deliberate disinformation is being spread in public debate, often challenging statistical agencies that disseminate public policy statistics that once proved to be beyond any doubt.

This raises new questions for NSI's. What attitude should they take on, how to handle this new phenomenon? What is considered to be disinformation (and what not), when does it enter the realm of official statistics; what works in handling disinformation and what not?

NSI's from European Union member states are working together in the Eurostat community to share experiences and to develop a common approach in handling disinformation. They were also inspired by another initiative within the EU on a different level, from the Directorate-General for Communication, to tackle disinformation.

In this presentation we show recent incidents of disinformation in some EU member states and we give an overview of the results from the Eurostat working group so far.

The ESS Taskforce strategic communication, consisting of communications executives of NSI's from several member states, defined answers to a range of relevant questions:

- What is disinformation? The taskforce produced a definition with respect to the statistical domain. When is disinformation becoming relevant to NSI's? What makes disinformation different from misinformation?
- How to identify, track & monitor disinformation? What techniques and tools are available?
- What can we learn from sharing information on incidents involving disinformation, occurring in member states? What are NSI's actually confronted with?
- Best and not so good practices: what worked in engaging disinformation, and what did not?
- What common 'Rules of Engagement' can be defined, making sure we do the right things, refrain from actions that might backfire; and turn that into an advice to NSI's in general?