

Combating disinformation with statistics

Aki Harju (Statistics Finland, Finland)

aki.harju@stat.fi

Abstract

In recent years, Statistics Finland has taken an active role in the fight against disinformation and misuse of statistics. Organization has increasingly and intentionally profiled itself, for example on social media, as a defender of correct information and a well-known and prominent opponent of disinformation. These goals have been identified as strategic communication priorities for the organization.

It has been essential to be proactive and responsive. The organization has not only intervened in the dissemination of inaccurate information, but also actively shared the correct information for example on emotional topics that have given rise to misunderstandings and deliberate distortions. Topics such as corona restrictions and their underlying causes, immigration, crime, gender equality and mortality and causes of death represent this kind of thematic field.

At the same time, the organization has sought to work actively to develop citizens' statistical literacy skills through training, campaigns, and competitions.

Consistent activity and professional courage, for example in correcting false information, has reflected a broader change in the communication and operational culture inside the organization.

Statistics Finland has traditionally enjoyed deep trust in society due to good reputation as a reliable and impartial institution. However, in the age of social media, this self-evident is repeatedly called into question.

In disinformation campaigns, Statistics Finland is positioned in some cases as part of the state propaganda machinery. These actions have reflected a wider erosion of trust in society due to polarization process, which has been the result of the economic and political crises. On the other hand, the credibility of Statistics Finland has also been used to increase effectiveness of disinformation. The name and logo of Statistics Finland have been repeatedly used in connection with deliberately disseminated incorrect information.

In my presentation, I will examine changes in the communication and operating environment in the context of Statistics Finland and statistics in general. By several examples of the misuse of statistics in various disinformation campaigns in which organization's data or authority has been used I will describe the extent and nature of the phenomenon. I will also outline the steps that Statistics Finland has done to strengthen citizens' trust in researched data, liable information and society.