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Case study on the communication strategy for the first combined Census in Argentina

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Abstract

Population, households, and housing censuses are a tool that has been implemented for centuries to guide both public and private decision-making. In Argentina, censuses have been used throughout the entire territory since 1869 at different intervals, although the United Nations recommends that they are carried out every 10 years (Department of Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations Statistics Division, 2010, p. 8). This enumeration, in Argentina or in any other place in the world, has a particular feature: it includes each and every person living across a given territory. Unlike other advertising campaigns or specific communication projects, a census must include all actors of society in its awareness campaign. In other words, there is no specific audience that must be addressed; the message of the census must reach all audiences in the territory. How do we design this strategy in a 21st century brimming with digital platforms? The aim is to delve into the National Population, Households and Housing Census 2022 of Argentina and reconstruct the awareness process of the first combined (on-site and online) census in the age of vertical screens, memes, fake news, and phishing, in a context where an increasingly specialized general public demands more information by the minute. Additionally, we will overview the campaigns designed for the 2001 and 2010 censuses in the country, in order to understand the point of departure and see how communication has evolved in the strategy implemented for the 2022 Census. Throughout his work, we will attempt to answer two core questions: how was the 2022 Census communicated in order to reach the whole Argentine population? What interactive digital communication instruments were used to create awareness of the importance of this tool that is central to the running of any State and why were those instruments chosen? The fact that over 50% of the population residing in the country preferred to complete the online census (2022 Census) shows that this digital format was a success. The hypothesis that follows, then, is that this high response is attributable to an efficient communication campaign. We will analyze these lines of work to prove the hypothesis and contribute to the assessment of the resources used in this discipline.

Introduction

As in many other countries, the National Population, Households and Housing Census of the Republic of Argentina was originally planned to take place in 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it had to be postponed until 2022.

The 2022 Census was defined in methodological terms as a de jure census for the first time in the history of Argentina, implemented by means of two collection modes: the Digital Census, available throughout the Argentine territory between 16 March and 18 May; and a field survey with face-to-face interviews on 18 May (Census Day). There were also special operations during the preceding days in rural areas and for collective dwellings and homeless people.

Since one of the main goals of a census is to achieve a high coverage rate, getting the population to participate is essential. It must be noted that Argentina is the second largest country in Latin America, extending across 2.78 million continental km², and with a diverse population in each of its 24 provinces. In light of this, INDEC designed a comprehensive communication campaign, aimed at providing detailed information about the 2022 Census, its goals, and its statistical importance in order to achieve an active engagement of the population, i.e., to make them "take ownership" of the Census. This task was carried out by the General Directorate of Dissemination and Communication (DGDC), which comprises three areas: the Communications Directorate, the Graphic Production and Editorial Coordination Unit, and the Coordination Unit of Information Services.

Background

One of the first tasks we undertook before preparing the communication strategy for the 2022 Census was a literature review on the previous censuses, especially those carried out in 1991, 2001, and 2010. Our research found only a handful of traditional documents, logo designs, basic newspaper ads, etc. This was partly due to the fact that there had never been an awareness campaign designed and developed in-house: advertising agencies had been contracted to deliver the message of previous censuses to the population. Additionally, the past decades have been pivotal in terms of the massification of digital media, platforms, and channels, while at the same time increasingly more niche audiences demand a variety of strategies to feel committed to a message and multiply it. Thus, this was going to be the first census to focus on specific and very diverse groups to share and spread the news on it.

This drove us to make two fundamental decisions: the communication campaign for the 2022 Census, its products and guidelines needed to be designed and monitored by INDEC's DCDG team; and every step needed to be documented for the benefit of future censuses.

Communication strategy for the 2022 Census

As explained above, INDEC carried out the first combined Argentine Census (Digital Census and face-to-face interviews). To this end, INDEC's General Directorate of Communication and Dissemination (DGDC) began, in 2018, to plan a comprehensive awareness strategy that would deliver a univocal message to the population through all the communication channels available. The goals of the campaign were:

- To reach every person residing in the national territory and deliver the news that the Census would be carried out.
- To create awareness among the population and the sectoral organizations about the benefits of the Census, both for themselves and for the country.
- To remind people of their legal duty and their right to participate.
- To explain to the population in advance what would be asked, why, and for what purposes, besides providing guidance on what to do and when.

- To inform about privacy protection and confidentiality of individual data.
- To clarify the objectives and questions of the Census whenever erroneous interpretations should arise.
- To thank the population and institutions for their participation.

The recommendation of the United Nations (2017) for population and housing censuses reflects a global paradigm shift: we do not only have to answer the question "how many?", but also "who are we?". In this way, each person and household's singularities acquire a new value. Based on this, the positive qualities of the 2022 Argentine Census were related to diversity, self-perception, and self-identification. The Census slogan was *Reconocernos*, which, in Spanish, refers to the collective—and individual— task of finding ourselves. The 2022 Census recorded particular features to contribute to a more inclusive and representative collective identity, safeguarding the confidentiality of individual data.

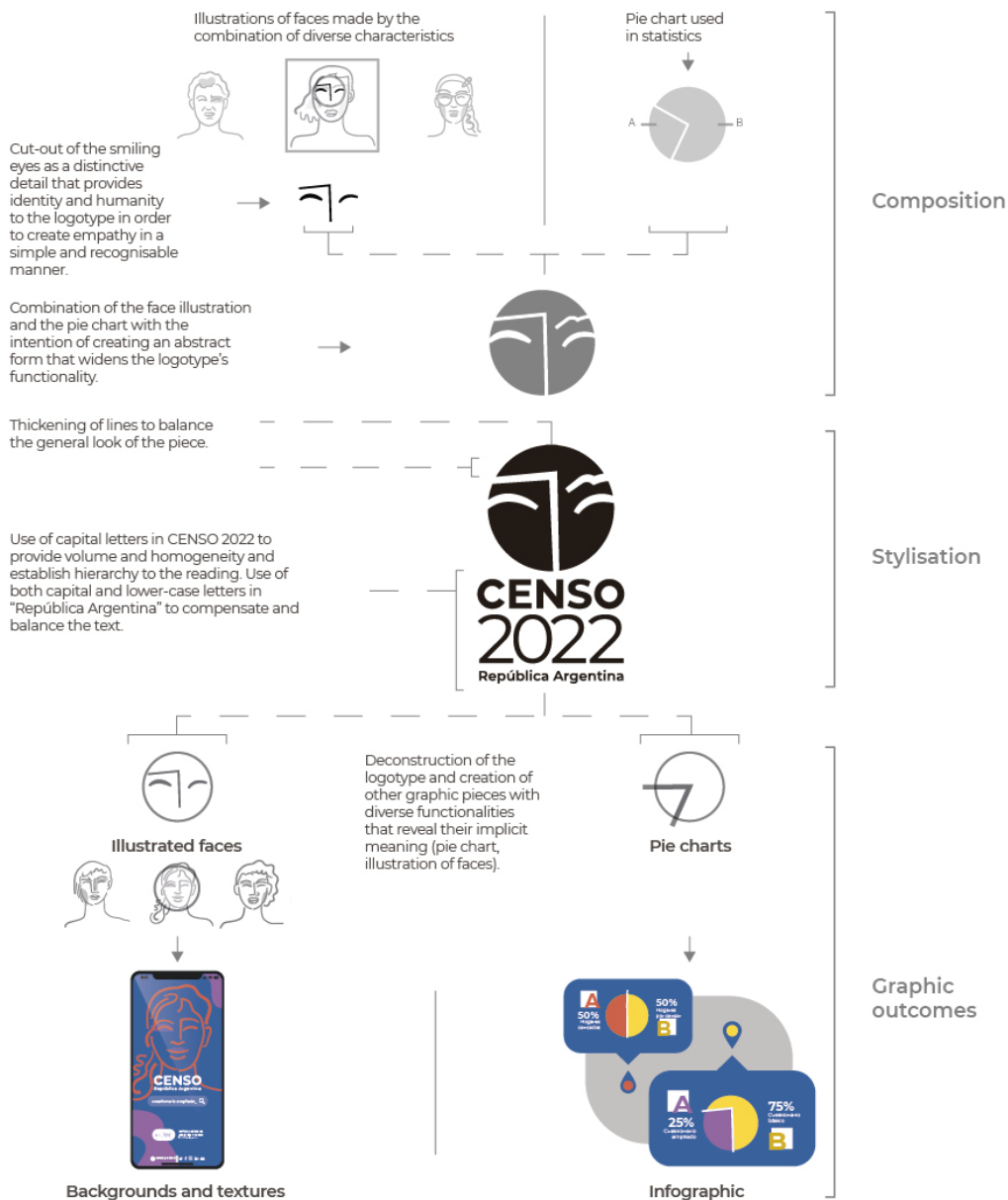
During the communication campaign, multiple communication resources and tools were used. A team of 70 people in the DGDC (70% of the total staff) worked on the Census, including communications specialists, journalists, designers, copyeditors, and web developers. Third parties were contracted only to work on graphic, audiovisual, and social media advertising products, and social listening.

Visual identity system

Based on the concept of diversity, identified in the preliminary analysis, one of the first resources created in-house for the Census was a comprehensive visual identity system. A Manual was developed to standardize the applications, colour palette, fonts, and correct use of the logo. The Manual organized and aligned not only the external actors, but also the bodies of the National Statistical System (NSS) and provincial and local governments who joined the effort of communicating the news of the 2022 Census. It is worth noting that, as the agency responsible for the Census, INDEC made it clear at every stage that the Census communication campaign could not be associated with any government slogans or logos.

The visual identity system was the first step to design communication tools, develop the 2022 Census website, social media, and communications products framed by a univocal graphic presentation.

Isologotype concept and composition



Web development

Due to the magnitude of the Census, the decision was made to develop a specific site (censo.gob.ar) external to our NSO's domain. The Census website was the indispensable centralizing tool for the awareness of the population. It presented historical demographic information, planning for the ongoing round, the conceptual

content and working materials for the census personnel, and the necessary content to inform and assist the population and users during the weeks preceding the Digital Census and Census Day. The DGDC's digital content team permanently created, uploaded, updated, and monitored content and sections as the various Census stages were taking place. The site was also the access platform for the Digital Census, the unified point of entry to complete the Census online with a simple, recallable domain.

Both the census website and the Digital Census web application were developed in-house. For the latter, designed by INDEC's Informatics Directorate, the DGDC team provided guidance on UX and UI. This meant a comprehensive study of similar digital products and services to follow the best international standards in web design.

During this period, the website received 25,770,835 users, an average of 525,935 per day.

Social media

For the first time, social media was used as a tool to disseminate the awareness campaign. Besides Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn, we considered content generated by users through other platforms, such as WhatsApp, Spotify, and TikTok. Specific social media accounts were created for the 2022 Census, to separate INDEC's usual statistical content from the national population enumeration.

In all cases, INDEC's Communication Directorate created organic content for each platform's feed or timeline. One of the most interesting findings of the campaign was the notable performance of Instagram reels, featuring our young digital team members. Due to the successful performance, some of the content posted on social media was later added to the national advertising plan to reach a wider audience and the use of Instagram reels has been adopted for INDEC's overall communication strategy.

Other products

Dissemination materials on the first bimodal Census of Argentina, such as institutional binders, posters and promotional products, were printed to display at fairs, festivals and sports events. Plotters were also added to the front of INDEC building and vehicles, and there were digital banners for strategic partners as well. In addition, there was a series of materials designed for census-takers to wear on Census Day: tote bags, vests, badges, and stickers to place on enumerated dwellings.

Census literacy

The Metadato INDEC programme, an initiative to promote accessibility and understanding of statistical outputs within and outside the education community, was expanded to include the 2022 Census. Online and presence-based events were held with schools across the country, and materials, such as magazines for students

and teachers including educational and entertaining content, were distributed. The materials were also posted on a special section on the 2022 Census website.

National advertising

The campaign was aimed at three types of audiences: population residing in the national territory, segmented into target audiences; people and institutions who use census data; and individual and legal persons participating before and during the Census. The implementation of the communication campaign had the additional challenge of actively incorporating digital and social media for the first time in Argentina's census history. To this end, for the digital universe, stakeholder groups were identified and grouped into eight categories (or clusters): work and production; communities; gender and diversity; public policies; Census methodology; people with disabilities; entertainment and art; and social life.

The communication campaign was divided into three stages:

Emotive (January-February 2022): the aim during this stage was to create awareness and inform the population that the 2022 Census would take place soon and that it was important to take part in it. It appealed to the excitement of a new census, to finding out how many people are in our country, where we are located, and how we live. It installed the Census brand and gave meaning to the slogan *Reconocernos* using communication pieces focused on diversity.

Digital format (16 March-18 May until 8AM): the Digital Census was presented and opened for participation, and the population was encouraged to self-enumerate using the digital questionnaire. The focus of the campaign was on the benefits of this methodological innovation (speed, security, simplicity).

Today is the day (18 May from 8AM to 6PM): the population was informed of the characteristics of the face-to-face field survey, and the fact that every person residing in each dwelling in the country had to wait for a census-taker to interview them or request the Digital Census code.

Nine TV ads were broadcasted on TV: "*Reconocernos*" and "My house is my country" during stage 1; "Self-census" and 4 jingles during stage 2; and "Numbers" and "Be there". In all cases, at least three scripts for each ad were drafted.

In the digital sphere, 2,242 unique audiovisual pieces were disseminated through national advertising (862 in stage 1; 991 in stage 2; and 389 in stage 3) in different formats: fixed, animated, and display.

There were joint actions with social media influencers on Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube. The promoted actions reached 3 million people, had 3.2 million views and 218,400 interactions.

These actions were also through radio, public space advertising, advertising in stadiums, cinemas, public transport, and a Census trailer travelling through the country.

Third parties were contracted to batch-produce graphic and audiovisual products for all formats. Each of the almost 7000 versions of around 2300 products for national advertising were reviewed and approved by the DGDC.

It is worth noting that, in Argentina, all official national advertising is channeled through the Chief of Cabinet's Office of the Presidency of the Republic. In practice, this means that the ad dissemination was a joint work with the Presidency of the Republic, since this public body has the capacity to coordinate and carry out an efficient spreading of information that reaches each and every corner of the national territory.

Press relations

For the 2022 Census, all spokespersons were media-trained to give interviews to news media throughout the country: INDEC's Director-General—who travelled to all 24 provinces of Argentina during the months of the Census—, four high-level INDEC directors, who gave an average of three interviews a day on radio, television, and print media between 25 January and 18 May 2022, and the directors of the provincial statistical offices. The DGDC has a specific team for press relations who organised the spokesperson's interviews and accompanied the Director-General. The team also prepared press releases and reports, was in constant communication with media producers and journalists to set up press conferences (including 3 conferences on Census Day), covered the development of the operation on Census Day, and monitored news and media for Census alerts 24/7.

User services

The Coordination Unit of Information Services handles direct communication with users and the population, through email and phone. For the 2022 Census, the team was in charge of answering the calls and emails through the usual INDEC contact channels, and the specific Census channels before 16 March (Digital Census launch day) and after 18 May (Census Day).

A couple of days before the digital census was opened for participation, during the two months it lasted and two weeks after Census Day, a help center service, trained and monitored by the Coordination Unit, was contracted for the task. People working at the help center followed a response protocol. The National Directorate of Social Statistics and Population supplied the key content and updated it weekly as the census stages were taking place. Additionally, the DGDC digital team answered user questions through the social media platforms throughout this whole period.

Strategic partnerships

To achieve a high level of participation, it was necessary to have the collaboration and commitment of the government, civil society organizations, and private organizations directly and indirectly involved.

In terms of accessibility, INDEC worked together with the National Disability Agency to translate audiovisual materials into Argentine sign language (LSA); create specific versions of advertising content for the audience with disabilities; translate the FAQ on the census website machine-readable (plain format) and plain language; and to set a specific telephone number that people with disabilities could call during Census Day.

There was a collaboration with the National Indigenous Policy Council to translate the *Reconocernos* and the tutorial on how to fill in the Digital Census into Wichi, Qom, Quechua and Guaraní.

INDEC also worked with fact-checking organizations, Chequeado and AFP Factual, for a quick response to fake news and misinformation about the Census.

There was a special collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund to create communications products for the African-descended and LGTBQ+ communities. Representatives from these specific groups were included in the scheduled meetings and commented on the products created.

Regarding social media companies, INDEC worked with Meta, Twitter, and Google. Some examples of the actions carried out were a direct link to the Census website whenever any key words were searched on Twitter; and home page promotions (HPP) and links to the Census website FAQ for Google searches.

On the public front, the National Secretariat of Public Innovation enabled devices and Wi-Fi in over 600 Digital Centers (Programa Puntos Digitales) in the 24 Argentine provinces for people to fill in their census forms online. The DGDC trained the Digital Center staff to adequately guide the population through the form and answer people's questions about the census.

Other strategic partnerships, fundamental to BTL campaigns, included Correo Argentino, the building workers' union (SUTERH), and the Sarmiento Historical Museum. Inside the National Public Administration (APN), it is worth mentioning the collaboration of the National ministries of Culture, Transport and Education, and the Provincial communication offices.

Social listening

The communication campaign also sought to provide authorities with a continuous stream of information on the reactions of the population during the whole Census stage. With this in mind, an active listening strategy was implemented to i) monitor digital conversation topics around the Census; ii) analyse the evolution of discussions on certain topics that originated in specific audiences; iii) identify fake news.

During the communication campaign, there were two marked peaks in conversation: on the day the Digital Census was launched, an estimated audience of over 17 million of Argentinian social media users (i.e., 43% of 39 million) were talking about it. On Census Day and the next 12 hours, the audience was of 59.4 million. This number exceeded the local active users because the conversation was also held by profiles from other countries.









Fake news and disinformation

Three main issues arose during the 2022 Census, which were rapidly addressed through all the relevant channels available.

- Overload of the Digital Census:** The Digital Census web application was stressed twice due to concurrency peaks: the first time was shortly after launch, and the second during the days nearing the deadline. According to the dashboard, during the highest peak, 8-11 p.m. on 16 March 2022 (launch day), 61,310 dwellings successfully filled in their Census questionnaires, while during the last day the application was available, on 17 May, the number totalled 440,000. On both occasions, fake news began to appear around the failure of the Digital Census. The team rapidly responded, using all channels available, thanking the population for their enthusiasm and clarifying that the issue would be temporary.
- DNI:** With the aim of linking census information with administrative records, both in the pilot tests and in the Experimental Census, the questionnaire included a question on the national identification number (DNI). According to the assessments performed, the DNI question displayed a high response rate in all tests, had a high acceptance rate and there was agreement across the State and the National Statistical System (NSS) about the advantages to statistical production. However, during the consultation stage, civil society organizations commented on the need for additional time to create awareness among people who might feel compromised by providing this information. Given this context and the sensitivity of the issue, INDEC decided to exclude the DNI question from the single questionnaire for the 2022 Census. Although the questionnaire did not request the DNI, the temporary screen to begin completing the Digital Census requested the DNI and date of birth to check whether the person completing the form was a human person of legal age who could answer for each member of the household. Once this verification stage was passed, the data was erased: it was not stored in any database or linked to the questionnaire. At certain points during the Census there was a misinformation campaign stating that the DNI had been included in the Census, even featuring screenshots of the DNI question in the Experimental Census form. The INDEC team rapidly responded with interviews, a section in the website FAQ, explanatory material including links to the definitive census questionnaire posted on the website, and the inclusion of a warning note on the temporary page of the Digital Census.

- 🗨️ **Disability:** The Census question on disability was formulated following the recommendations of the Washington Group and ECLAC. The methodological decision was made to use the terms “difficulty” and “limitation” to ask about disability in the household for two reasons. The first, is that the term “disability” can have different meanings and be interpreted in various ways by different population groups. Some, for example, could assume that they should only answer in the affirmative if they have been issued an official disability card. During the Census, some disability groups declared themselves against the omission of the word “disability” due to an assumed disregard for persons with disability. INDEC rapidly issued a statement on the matter, posted a section on the website’s FAQ, and gave interviews to clarify the situation.

Conclusions

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 The 2022 Census has clearly demonstrated the effects of the digital age. When we compare the highest peaks detected through social listening, they correspond exactly with the highest peaks in completion of Digital Census forms. This, together with the almost 2250 digital pieces were greatly associated with the success of the Digital Census: over 50% of the population filled in the Census online, marking a record-breaking success in the region given that in other countries the scope of online participation reached 15% at its best.
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 The decision to conduct an in-house communication campaign for the Census allowed us to harness INDEC's experience throughout the whole DGDC, in a manner that helped knowledge and insights flow through work teams, and unify the messages among all channels (website, social media, press releases, interviews, etc.). For example, our user service area's reports on user queries were a great thermometer to continuously measure which messages were getting through to the population, and which needed some fine tuning.
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 The communication strategy designed by the DGCD took advantage of the recommendations and learning processes shared by the international statistical community, which helped in the preparation for possible difficulties, in the communication of clarifying messages and in promptness of response.
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 Strategic partnerships are essential to better understand the needs of specific groups and create products tailored to their needs. However, these groups and organizations tend to have their own objectives and agendas and might want to take advantage of the national campaign to transmit messages unrelated to the census. NSOs' communication campaigns must take care not to become a vessel for political or social demands.
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 The comprehensive communication strategy for the 2022 Census organised and aligned not only the external actors, but also the bodies of the National Statistical System (NSS), with the aim of reaching the population with the Census news in a clear and precise manner.
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 The fact that one of the core messages highlighted the importance of the census as a right for the population invited the engagement of opinion leaders and strategic partners.
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 Due to the continuous monitoring during the campaign and the performance of contents, the decision was made to adjust the segmentation of audiences to better direct a single message to wider audiences.
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 During a national operation of this magnitude, it is essential to be alert 24/7 to rapidly respond to —internal and external— changing scenarios.

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