

Ethics and proactive communication: the Istat case

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Abstract

Why is ethics so important today?

We live in a mass-media-driven world, which can result in a disregard for the audience. Less attention is paid to the concrete needs of different user groups, because everyone is indiscriminately subjected to the mechanisms of advertising.

Talking about communication, this abuse of the media generally leads to the neglect of rules and principles.

This creates a need for ethics. Public communication and, in our case, statistical communication, cannot escape this need.

Ethics in communication refers to the principles and guidelines that govern the responsible and fair exchange of information among individuals or groups of people. This includes the moral considerations and values which must guide the way we communicate.

To build trust, maintain positive reputation and relationships and contribute to a healthy and respectful communications culture, it is essential to adhere to ethical standards in communication.

In the Anglo-American cultural area, the ethics of communication has found important developments in contemporary thinking. In Italy these issues came late, but recent decades have made up for lost time, partly thanks to research in mass communication studies.

In line with this vision of a proactive and ethical communication and in compliance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, as well as with its own mission and vision, Istat has defined some key modes for communicating with its target audiences, such as:

- using highly recognizable and consistent visual branding (both on social channels and the institutional website)
- engaging directly with audiences through timely, transparent and data-driven communication

- respecting for the right of all citizens, regardless of level of knowledge of statistics, to receive adequate information, with no exclusion of categories or groups and with the same recognition and visibility for all
- respecting gender and diversity in the use of language, taking into account all the different conditions that characterize people and their way of life
- designing for all: accessibility by default and by design. Using images with alternative text, infographics with text versions, websites built for screen readers, using captions in YouTube videos, paying attention to color contrast in social cards and more
- to be a bridge and not a barrier to understanding through the use of simplified language for a wide audience. In this paper, we would like to share with you the key concepts from which we started to outline our style of communicating statistical information.

We will do this by sharing our experiences, our lessons learned and our next goals.

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Paper

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1. Introduction

Statistical information: we can't avoid conveying it, but we can communicate it well or poorly.

The choices are many, so having an ethic for communicating is imperative.

Ethics in communication refers to the principles and guidelines that govern the responsible and fair exchange of information between individuals or groups.

It involves the moral considerations and values that should guide all communication practices. Today, it is often the case that disregard for rules and principles mainly dominates the sphere of communication, in a general context that thus registers:

- o low respect for the audience (as little more than a target to be reached and/or misleading advertising cases);
- o lack of attention to the specific needs of different target groups; o real abuse of the media (often instrumental, ideological).

Rather, to build trust, to maintain positive relationships and reputation, as well as to contribute to a healthy and respectful culture of communication, it is essential to adhere to ethical standards in the communication process.

2. What are the main ethical principles that govern communication?

- o Transparency: ethical communication involves being transparent about motives, intentions and conflicts of interest.
- o Fairness and balance: the goal of ethical communication is the fair and objective presentation of information. It is important to avoid bias and to present a balanced view of different points of view.
- o Privacy: respecting people's privacy is fundamental. It is a basic ethical principle to avoid unauthorized disclosure of sensitive or confidential information.
- o Cultural sensitivity: awareness of and respect for cultural differences is an important part of communication. Ethical communication involves avoiding stereotypes and understanding cultural nuances.
- o Empathy: considering the feelings and perspectives of others is part of ethical communication. Empathy builds trust and creates a positive environment in which to communicate.
- o Responsibility: communicators are responsible for their messages' consequences. This includes being aware of the potential impact of their words and actions on individuals and society.
- o Accountability: when errors occur, ethical communicators take responsibility for their actions and seek to correct any misinformation or harm caused.

3. How does Istat respect such principles?

3.1. Transparency

The Istat website has an area dedicated to Transparent Administration (in Italian only), as required by current Italian legislation. The web editorial team of the site, which reports to the Communication Directorate, is responsible for here publishing all information about the Organization, as well as information about personnel, competitions, performance, activities and procedures, tenders and contracts, budgets. A list, constantly updated, of the annual wages of all Istat executives is also available in this section.

Furthermore, for the purposes of transparency in the way we communicate our statistical content, if an error or typo is found in content already published on our site (e.g. press releases, publications, datasets) and therefore needs to be replaced, as is sometimes the case, a note will always be added explaining the reasons for the replacement and the date on which it was made. This note is published on the same page as the replaced content.

3.2. Impartiality

Istat never expresses value judgements when disseminating data, analyses or publications. It also never takes any political position.

It tries to maintain a tone as neutral as possible.

In fact, as stated in our mission statement: “The mission of the Italian National Institute of Statistics is to serve the community by producing and communicating high-quality statistical information, analyses and forecasts in complete independence and in accordance with the strictest ethical and professional principles and most up-to-date scientific standards...”

Moreover, in accordance with the principle of impartiality, every December the calendar of economic releases for the following year is published. This ensures that Istat never disseminates data in ways that could serve the needs of one political party or another.

In addition, our releases are made available to the entire community at the same time through publication on our website.

3.3. Privacy

Istat pays particular attention to the privacy of users and respondents.

All the measures and practices adopted to this end are set out in a specific section of Istat website which contains, in particular, information on the processing of the personal data of users of the "istat.it" domain and of those taking part in other Institute initiatives such as events, newsletters, contests and so on.

Furthermore, in compliance with the current GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), Istat has adopted a cookie management policy on its websites.

For example, on the institutional website, we removed the embedding of YouTube to prevent this platform from collecting cookies from users of the Istat website without their knowledge. The same applies to Tableau (a platform for dashboard creation).

3.4. Cultural sensitivity

We never use language or images that invoke cultural stereotypes in our communication campaigns.

As a general rule, we do not represent families with images of only the traditional family, nor do we represent the population with only people of Caucasian ethnicity.

But even the best intentions can sometimes be misrepresented. In the communication campaign for the 2018 Permanent Population Census, the choice of an image of a dynamic woman standing with a baby and busy on the phone, used with another image of a man with two children sitting on a couch, did not go down well with the feminist community in Italy. From their point of view, the image of the woman in this way was that of a mother who was not very concerned about the safety of her children, in contrast to the image of the man who suggested the idea of a father who was very comfortable with his children. A lesson in learning from mistakes.

We also pay close attention to the choice of colors we use in our web products and applications and in the creation of cards for their social promotion. As much as possible, we try to use colors that are different from those that have always identified males and females in cultural gender stereotypes (blue and pink). An example of this is the interactive content "How many babies are named...?", one of the most visited web applications on our site, for which we use orange for females and green for males. This year there was also a change in the title of this product: from "Quanti bambini si chiamano" (How many babies are named) to "Quante bambine e bambini si chiamano" (How many female babies and male babies are named). In fact, the Italian language, unlike the English language, has a different term for identifying male and female children. Finally, in line with the care we take to avoid any kind of discrimination, we have been paying attention for years to the way in which we write greetings on the occasion of traditional religious holidays. For example, we know that not everyone celebrates Christmas, even though many public and private companies in Italy close for the holidays in this period of the year. For this reason, our greetings always contain the text "Happy Holidays" and never "Merry Christmas".

3.5. Empathy

Our mission, as mentioned, is to serve the community not only by producing high-quality statistical information, but also by communicating it in the best possible way so that anyone, even non-expert users, can easily understand and use it. This also applies to the tone with which we interact with and listen to our users and it turns into empathy when, through this listening, we are sometimes able to improve our statistical offerings.

A recent and striking case was when in 2020 we published a dashboard on our website showing Covid deaths in the Italian municipalities. The visualization was set up so that the first municipality displayed by default was the one with the most Covid deaths in Italy, Bergamo. One woman from Bergamo later wrote us to say that while she understood the need to inform the community with this figure, it was very painful for her to see a graph with such dramatic data about her community at the top of the dashboard, especially since Covid had just killed her father.

We took what she wrote to us very seriously. In fact, the very next morning, we changed the setting of the graph to use as the default the municipality that is always the first municipality in Italy (Agliè). We communicated this change to the woman, who was very pleased and impressed by the attention shown to her by Istat (Humanizing the data).

3.6. Responsibility and Accountability

Two sides of the same coin: responsibility and accountability.

As stated above, we take great care in choosing the words and images we use to communicate our data.

We are aware of the potential impact they can have on our goals.

Nevertheless, sometimes we fail to achieve this goal, as in the case of the campaign for the Permanent Population Census (see above).

Two other examples of missed targets: an Instagram post where we talked about birth dates with a baby bottle and were accused of promoting artificial breastfeeding and a Facebook post celebrating World Homeopathic Day where we were accused of promoting palliative products for real cures. In the first case we decided not to respond (the issue was too sensitive, and it was deemed best not to fuel the controversy that had inevitably already arisen; any response could have made things worse rather than the other way around, better to wait for it to die down on its own). In the second case, on the contrary, we intervened by clarifying and explaining that homeopathic products are recognized as medicinal products in the European Union, as provided for by Directive 2001/83/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 November 2001.

4. Charter of Services for Users of Statistical Information and Guaranteed Quality Standards

To reaffirm the Istat commitment to ethical communication with users, for more than 15 years the Communication Directorate has been drafting and regularly updating a Charter of services for users of statistical information. It defines the quality standards of the provided communication and dissemination services, their use, the commitments towards the users and the quality standards guaranteed.

The document is available on the institutional website and it identifies four different quality aspects for each user service: timeliness, accessibility, transparency and efficiency. Moreover, it sets out indicators and goals for each of them.

The document mainly aims to ensure that services comply with the following principles:

- o Equality: the guarantee of equal conditions of use and equal treatment in the provision of services to all users, without distinction as to sex, race, religion, language or political opinions and the prohibition of any unjustified discrimination.
- o Impartiality: the service is guaranteed to be objective, fair, equitable and impartial to all of its users.
- o Continuity: The service is continuous, regular and uninterrupted. Should they occur, disruptions are minimised.
- o Clarity and transparency: the user is guaranteed to receive clear, complete and timely information on the procedures, times and criteria for the provision of the service.
- o Efficiency and effectiveness: the performance will be achieved through continuous improvement of efficiency, effectiveness and quality, adopting the most functional managerial, organizational, procedural and technological solutions.
- o Accessibility: Ensure access for all without discrimination, regardless of physical, technological or environmental barriers.

- o Participation: continuous dialogue with users through reports and suggestions, complaints and satisfaction surveys (User relations).

5. Next steps

By 2024, Istat will have a new area on its website that will focus exclusively on ethics, as part of its communication strategy.

In addition, two working groups have been formed, one to develop inclusive education guidelines and another to develop gender policies. Representatives from the Communication Directorate participate in both teams on the competency aspects.

Finally, the work of the “Comitato Unico di Garanzia per le pari opportunità” (Unique Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities), active at Istat since 2011, will be pursued with the aim of improving the well-being of employees and combating any discrimination within the Institute.

However, the most important challenge in the coming years, even in the field of communication, will be to respect ethical principles in a world that is increasingly based on artificial intelligence (AI). Statistical agencies cannot escape this challenge, as they too, including Istat, are beginning to implement AI in their user services and data management.

The first principle at risk is privacy. How to combine privacy and artificial intelligence? AI has developed at an exponential rate in recent years. It is now part of everyone's daily life. A lot of questions arise when we consider that the machine learning (ML) on which intelligent systems are based is precisely designed to process huge amounts of data. Where does this information come from? Is it handled ethically? Does it respect personal, social and individual rights? In a world dominated by AI, how can we ensure privacy?

In our Countries and at the European level - see the AI Act - we are all following closely what the relevant legislative bodies are doing in this regard.

As stated, this is a challenge we cannot afford to miss, because it is how we face it that will allow us, as official statistical agencies, to maintain our brand reputation, keeping up with the most innovative technological developments and thus improving the quality of the services we provide to the community.