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Dissemination to the news media

The national statistics institutes and the requirements of the media

‘The Challenge of Communicating Statistics’

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The relationships of the national statistics institute with the news media in public communication of statistics, and in public life generally

The news media play a part in many facets of the public identity of a national statistics institute. Although this varies considerably across countries, an increasing variety of national and international news media influences the work of a national statistics institute, or can be influenced by the national statistics institute. Some news media provide direct links to special communities, while others not only respond to contributions from the national statistics institute, but challenge what is prepared and how it is produced. Not only the internet, but globalisation, mergers and an increasing intrusiveness mark how the media has developed over the past decade, although some countries have news media with more intrusive elements than others. The United Kingdom has long had a particularly intrusive and demanding news media.

Florence Nightingale described statistics as *"the most important science in the whole world because upon it depends the practical application of every other science"*. Her capacity to use

statistics to explain and compare public concerns was far beyond what official statisticians would be likely to seek to do now. In 1989, Lionel Jospin, the Prime Minister of France said of professional statisticians, *"The right to information has become one of the fundamental rights of the twentieth century citizen. In a society where information and the media play a considerable part, your [professional statisticians] action helps safeguard a fundamental human liberty. The working methods you use are complex, the data you deal with difficult to evaluate. An effort to explain [to the public] is necessary. This effort is required by democracy. All citizens must be in a position where they can understand and assess the policies followed by governments."* What Florence Nightingale did not face in her great achievements, but was perhaps foreseen by Lionel Jospin a century later in our time is:

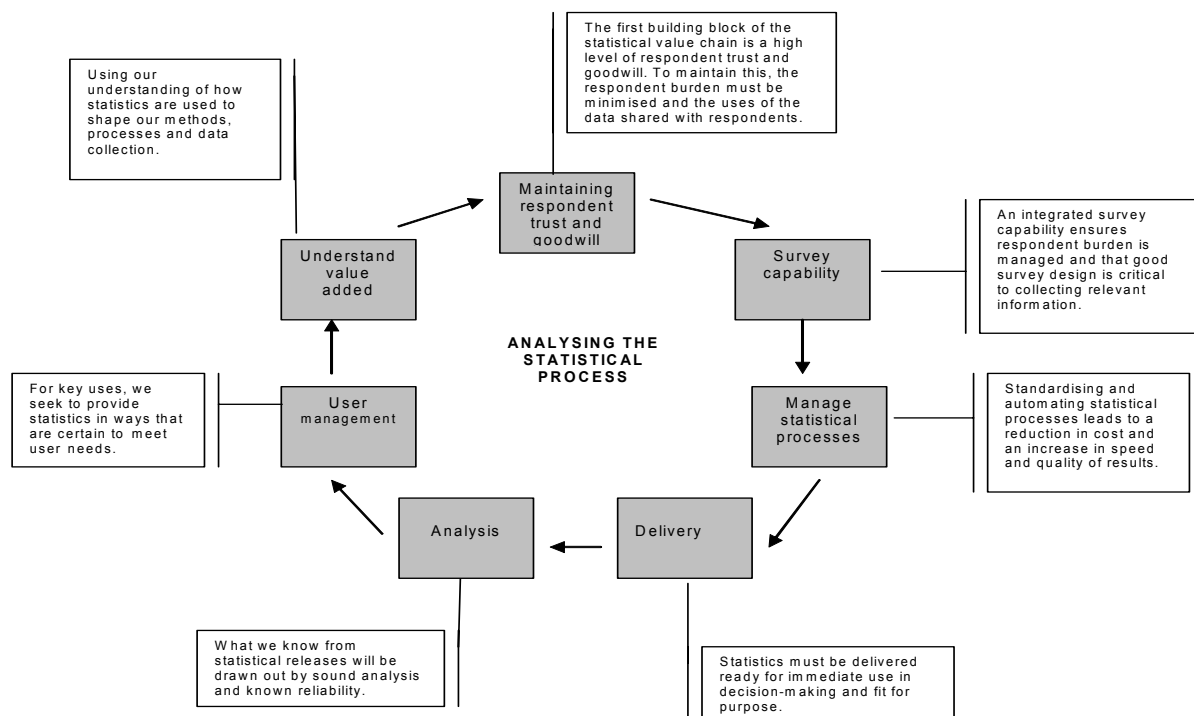
- The existence of a real time omnipresent media, prepared to bring research to the world's attention as it evolves, as a mechanical process without time for reflection, wisdom or even replication
- The access by all to evolving ideas and experiences, through the internet and other knowledge management tools
- The politics of interest groups, who can form rapidly, and whose agenda for action may span nations, politics and cultures, with or without legal authority
- The rapid appropriation and assignment of property rights to knowledge, regardless of contribution, through global markets and rapid leverage
- A growing constitutional and legal appreciation of cultural differences in scientific, social and political concepts that affect the values behind our judgements as scientists
- A huge interest in the quantification of phenomena of all sorts

The work of official statisticians is increasingly under a continuous spotlight. Statistical offices tell us about every group in society but statisticians need to be aware that interest groups can respond as fast as statistics are released and provide competing interpretation of results. Where the statistical office is not satisfying interest groups then they will produce competing analyses, alternative sources and new comparisons.

It is also a time of opportunity. The internet is making it possible for official statisticians to consider themselves operating their own form of public broadcasting, enabling them to communicate direct to the community, without the involvement of any third party. For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) website in the UK now gets some 700,000 hits per month, of which about one quarter are school pupils. The website is modelled on that of the BBC itself, with a simple look and feel, although for the more technical user, we have yet to meet expectations as fully. The internet can provide more channels for managing relations with the media. The web can make regular pointers to items of interest a low cost way of bringing releases to the attention of interested journalists. The internet also brings new risks. The immediacy of access means that when errors have occurred as a result of process failure, the impact may be rapid and widespread.

The news media and the statistics value chain

We can use the statistics value chain to identify the diverse nature of communications involved in official statistics, and what we aim to influence. The identity of a statistical office reflects not only the visibility of the individual components of the statistics value chain, but also the very special links between the components of the chain, which are also important to the special contribution of a national statistics institute. Each link in the value chain involves quite distinct communities, and the news media has a different part in each.



Maintaining respondent trust and goodwill

A statistics office needs to target its communications with respondents in order to encourage and foster their trust and goodwill. There are a number of ways that internal and external communications can be targeted in order to achieve this. For example a statistics office can work to encourage and motivate field interview teams to appreciate how important their work is in producing reliable statistics, and in demonstrating how important the statistics are. An office can target external communications to respondents by including material on how statistics are valued, including media comment where appropriate. And it can work to ensure there is maximum public commitment to a population census, before information gathering begins.

Respondents will also be influenced by debate and comment on statistics in the media. Media interest in big surveys raises respondents' awareness of how statistics are used, both at a national and, increasingly in the UK, at a regional level. The office's handling of critical incidents influences respondents' views of its integrity and trustworthiness, and will also impact on general discussion of attitudes to privacy and the growth, both in government and in commercial organisations, in information matching.

Survey capability

Work on integration of survey taking and developments in survey design should be highlighted by the statistics office to survey respondents. Demonstration of effective use of respondents' contributions and efficient survey design can help generate trust in all statistical processes. This competitive edge in survey taking and design should also be highlighted in communications to major survey funders and users. This is another way in which public trust can be gained.

Leading edge developments in survey taking and design can be used as a way of engaging with specialist technical and professional media who have an interest in processes and technology. These sorts of developments may also be a way of engaging education media interest.

Manage statistical processes

Work to standardise and automate statistical processes should improve a statistics office's reputation and enhance relations with all sectors. This will be achieved through limiting the potential for errors and improving timeliness of results. Standardisation of methods can also help inform those users of statistics who want to understand the underlying methodologies

Delivery

Timely and user-friendly delivery of 'fit for purpose' statistics for use by the media and others can have an enormous impact on a statistics office's external relations. The goal of the office should be to provide authentic measures that are available to all at once. Engagement with the media should focus on providing scheduled pre-announced access to statistics and allowing access to expert statisticians at the time of release.

Analysis

A statistics office can demonstrate that it is professional and knowledgeable in all its undertakings by focussing its analysis on questions of high interest and provision of relevant comparison in both internal and external communications.

User management

Provision of statistics in ways that are certain to meet users' needs is necessary to maintain the goodwill of users and the overall standing of the office. This requires the statistics office to engage regularly with users in order to understand their requirements and to provide them with

information on how the statistics can be used. The limits of statistical measurement should be clearly identified to users.

Understand added value

The reporting activity by a statistics office should be its key interaction with media and others, and where reporting is of high quality, this improves levels of general confidence in the statistical system used to produce the statistics. In this scenario, if the processes are not the subject of discussion, they are a non-story.

The link between survey taking and the resulting statistics

Public trust in national statistics institutes and in official statistics determines our national capacity to collect information successfully. The level of trust determines the range of surveys that can be undertaken, the quality and cost of work, and the resulting capacity to integrate data. Building up trust requires close working with communities and organisations. Where trust is high, the return to the citizen in completing surveys is clear overall, and each transaction with each citizen or business does not in itself need to have a specific reward. Trust will also be supported through users and commentators acknowledging that statistical offices operate independently, and have no role other than impartially producing statistics, with the necessary power to ensure confidentiality protection. This reassures users and respondents that the statistics office is not directed by any need to provide any services or products other than official statistics.

The promotion of a common brand across surveys and published statistics can help reinforce trust in each.

Visibility of official statistics

Confidence in a national statistics institute's 'flagship' statistics, such as the Consumers Price Index, the population census and Gross Domestic Product, can have an impact on the confidence the public has in all official statistics. If these key statistics are managed well, then there are consequential benefits for confidence in other statistics. Similarly any critical incident relating to these key statistics that is not handled well can have a damaging impact on the reputation of all official statistics.

Confidence in the system as a whole comes from the spread of performance

The performance of the statistics institute across all parts of the statistics value chain has an impact on confidence in the system as a whole. For example confidence in the timeliness of publishing statistics to particular reference periods can lead to confidence in the overall system, whereas the least timely statistics may set a view of performance levels for all official statistics. Confidence can be developed through communicating clear messages about what are official statistics, and how they are formulated, i.e. they are based on real observations and that statistics is the science of grouping those observations. It is important to be clear on what statistics are not official statistics, which can be difficult when reporting on performance targets.

Showing benefits of integration of processes to major stakeholders

The value chain provides a way of identifying the benefits of integration of processes to present to major stakeholders. This helps in emphasising the coherence of statistics, and the benefits of investment in official statistics. Responses to critical incidents can be used to articulate to the media the importance of sufficient relevant investment in official statistics.

Added value from spillover benefits, such as the downstream later benefits of a periodic large census publicity budget

Large periodic population censuses may be the only high budget promotion activity for a national statistics office, so it needs to be used to capture a spillover benefit in confidence in overall survey taking. Spillover benefits after a periodic large census publicity budget include higher response rates in all surveys and greater awareness of official statistics. Publicity for the population census needs to make positive links between the census and the national statistics office.

Protect integrity through limiting external influence

Processes that involve public scrutiny engender trust in how all processes are carried out. For example advisory boards may have role to play here in demonstrating openness and transparency, for example the RPI Advisory Committee in the UK. Whilst the media may write about the perception that sensitive statistical decisions are associated with some form of political influence; such assertions should be corrected. This can be achieved through transparency and consistency of processes.

Contemporary challenges to confidence that reflect in attitudes of the news media

There are a number of contemporary challenges that we can identify that have an impact on the attitude of the media:

1. Societies have become more diverse. This means that official statistics, particularly where they are used as a means of assessing the government's performance, must be trusted by all these groups and be accessible to them. The absence of good statistical information means that ideology, anecdote and experience will be extrapolated to paint a different picture than that which might be filled in robustly by good statistical information. Therefore, through the public statistical system being accepted as a preferred supplier, government reduces the area where debate focuses on the quality of the statistics, rather than the issues themselves
2. Policy processes seldom recognise that statistics can be revised. For example, official statistics have a direct influence on funding reallocation in population-based funding formulae. Where they are revised, there is a continued tension between the original allocation, and that which might now be the most relevant given current estimates
3. Increasing linkage of official statistics to ministerially selected measures of government performance through performance targets has three effects:
 - Firstly, political comment on targets creates a sense of political oversight of measures

- Secondly, targets create thresholds and measurement bounds that are far too precise for statistical processes to measure in a robust manner
- Thirdly, performance targets create an interest in statistical processes. In the UK, the most significant is the indexation of gilts to the RPI and the obligation to redeem gilts (some £50 billion) if the Governor of the central bank judges gilt holders will be disadvantaged.
- 4. Higher visibility of threshold targets which assumes a degree of precision that official statistics cannot achieve
- 5. Measures of quality may reduce confidence in the policies on which statistics are based
- 6. Communities wish to own statistics about themselves
- 7. Increased analytical detail makes comparison with other information more demanding
- 8. Greater demand for coherence across statistical measures, e.g. in economic statistics
- 9. Needs have changed radically, but statistics evolve more slowly
- 10. A continually greater range of comparisons is sought

Specific elements of the UK experience

Communicating with the press has long been a very involved area for ONS in the UK. This has evolved even during my five years in post and I would like to use examples of what has happened during the last five years. These examples cover a mix of successful and unsuccessful experiences. Even when we were not hugely successful we have found we could learn from everything, good and bad and see how we could incorporate this into future media planning. Some of the experiences have contributed to the later section of the paper on incident management.

The statistical system of the UK has no overall legislative basis. For both business surveys and the population census, there is strong legislation enabling information to be collected and then protected from use for anything other than statistical purposes. Common law underpins household survey activity. In the UK, much accountability comes from a strong parliament, with well institutionalised traditions that enable opposition to the government of the day through regular challenge of ministers and public officials. The press are highly active, with some pockets of extraordinary ability.

The UK media are voracious users of official statistics, and coverage of statistics every day is extensive. The UK media also holds public institutions in the UK to account, and the Office for National Statistics is no exception to this. We publish an extensive range of statistics, some using systems which are now being redeveloped. The devolved nature of large parts of the statistical system means that policy and operational departments publish a large share of statistics that report on government performance. Until the introduction of the National Statistics Code of Practice, standards were not consistent in the degree of ministerial involvement in the timing of the release of these statistics. There remains strong concern about early access and ministerial involvement.

Learning from each other

In considering this topic, we have to recognise, what do we want and need users and suppliers of raw data to understand about statistics, what is the role of the media in achieving this and how easily does this fit with the press' own agenda of filling news pages? And when we talk about the press, who or what do we mean? Can they be treated as one entity? It is important to recognise that they are not all one entity. There are several different types of media with whom we deal, they all serve different news agendas and should be treated differently. I have outlined below the main groupings of journalists with whom ONS interacts and how we try to respond to them.

News agency reporters

These journalists are predominantly interested in ensuring that their users access raw market data through their systems before anyone else can supply the information: the city analysts will add comment and interpretation to the data to them, so speed and neutrality of delivery are key to fulfilling the news agency's requirements. How can we make this as easy for them as possible? Apart from the necessary technology, we ensure that the relevant statisticians are on hand to answer questions and explain the background. This helps foster good relations and these journalists know that they can contact the statisticians at any point for more information. It tends to be a relationship based on trust.

National newspapers economic journalists

These journalists have a requirement to fill their pages every day. They need to demonstrate an understanding of their subject whilst searching for a 'news' angle. They can explore minutiae and then make that the story although it may be unrepresentative of the general trend. We have to ensure that press offices are equipped with all relevant background information so that any irrelevant coverage is limited from the outset.

Economic commentators

Economic commentators take a much more long-term look at the market and earn their plaudits by being able to read statistics correctly. They do not sensationalise short-term blips, if anything they are more sympathetic to them as they know how difficult statistical collection is. They are interested in the process of data collection in as much as it has an impact on the quality and direction of statistical innovation. I have spent considerable time with these journalists and had some stimulating discussions with them.

Regional press

The regional press tend not to be interested in statistical processes but seek out any facts unique to their area. Their coverage can generate much publicity for a statistical office which helps the reputation of the office 'on the doorstep' and therefore improves the response rate for field force interviewers. ONS has arranged a few regional tours where members of the press office have gone out to all parts of the country to meet regional journalists to demonstrate what statistics we

hold. This has proved to be enormously successful. Labour market statistics are also released on a regional basis and always receive extensive coverage in the regional press.

Broadcast journalists

Broadcast journalists need statistical information for background material for news items, considering what the statistics say about trends in the economy or society. Broadcast journalists have to present often complex information in an easily accessible format. They will often require in-depth information at very short notice and our experience has been that they are keen to make links and develop relationships. I have visited the BBC and met journalists, editors and producers at all levels to explain the policies surrounding the release of statistics.

Political reporters

When statistics are used in the political arena, the statistics themselves, their credibility, means of production and manner of release can become a political story. The independence of ONS is challenged on occasion and our experience has been that transparency of method has been the most important defence to this.

News reporters

They tend to be interested in only really big events like the Census or the Royal Wedding, or where the statistics have important implications for the lifestyle of the residents of the country. In a similar way to the regional press, if there is an interesting story to tell, for example the composition of households in which children are now brought, the statistical processes become irrelevant and it's the newsworthiness of the finding that is everything.

In as much as we want users to trust the comprehensiveness of our statistics, to what extent can a relationship of trust be developed between the providers of statistics and the press? The media is a very important gateway to our users but in valuing their potential to ensure we reach our users, we also need to be aware that the media has its own agenda of filling news pages.

Any consideration of the relationship with the press has to consider the following issues:

- what is newsworthy and what makes a good story?
- what will they consider "interesting" to their readers?
- how much are they inclined to trust officialdom?
- what is their agenda?

And against all of this we have to remember, we produce the statistics, we choose the time and manner of release (often many months in advance), we have the advance knowledge and we know the channels which will be disseminating them. So why is it that sometimes the coverage of the statistic seems unrepresentative of its intrinsic news value?

This is a conundrum all statistical offices face. When we do our job well, we are news neutral. The statistical processes themselves should not be newsworthy. Monthly economic indicators do

not appear by accident; it takes a well-managed operation to ensure that the systems and processes are in place to produce comprehensive, cohesive, accurate and verified statistics to strict timetable. So far so good. But there is never going to be, and we should not expect it, coverage in the press congratulating us for surmounting the inherent challenges in producing statistics. While some members of the press may well have an appreciation of the complexities of statistical production and be aware that producing a retail sales statistic for example can be a real achievement. However the release of this statistic is never going to be news unless the statistics in itself is considered to be in some way newsworthy.

Another tension in the UK is that some of the media are openly in favour of particular political parties. As statistics are used to assess government performance, then for nearly twenty years, the newspapers associated with the opposition of the day have been consistently more critical of official statistics. Some elements of the media have their own agenda of which ONS needs to be aware.

Mention should also be made of the National Statistics Code of Practice. This sets out guiding principles for methodological, statistical and publication decisions. Users and commentators understand this now. The Code is recognised and accepted and is used extensively as a reference point. It took the first eighteen months of my job to get it published and in retrospect, I would make it an overriding priority were I to take up post again

At ONS, we are currently working to take attention away from any perceived tensions over the reliability of the statistic itself but instead to ensure that all processes are transparent and consistent so that users and commentators can have confidence in them. I have outlined a few examples below.

Some specific UK case studies

Network Rail, Royal Wedding

In 2002, ONS had to make a classification decision regarding the treatment of Network Rail in the UK national accounts. As is standard practice, ONS followed the relevant international guidelines and accounting protocols and judged that Network Rail should not be scored in the government sector. As far as we were concerned, that should have been the end of the story. It was not. The decision was called into question and ONS was accused of acceding to the Treasury's desire to keep the recorded amount of public borrowing low. The damage that this did to the perception of our independence was enormous. The reality was that ONS found itself in the position of having to explain another Government department's policy. Statisticians should never find themselves having to do this.

Compare this to the recent position I found myself in relation to the Royal Wedding. As Registrar General for England and Wales, I had the ultimate responsibility of deciding if any of the eleven objections to the Royal Wedding were valid. It is impossible to exaggerate the media interest in this in the UK. Arrangements for the Royal Wedding had been subject to intense media scrutiny and the press appeared desperate to have a final obstacle placed in the path of the event. However, where this differed from the Network Rail case is that the legal argument was

carried out by the Lord Chancellor and in the event I "ruled" that the objections were invalid and that the Royal Wedding could go ahead. This was the end of the story.

For me, there were two lessons to be learnt from this.

- Wherever you are seen to be involved in the day to day decision making process, any final decision is going to be viewed with more suspicion
- Secondly, the use of language. In classification decisions I "judge" whereas in the case of the Royal Wedding I "ruled". It's a question of semantics but it makes a huge difference.

2001 Census

ONS conducted its most recent census in April 2001 and started to release the results in September 2002. As you will be all too aware, the Census is an enormous body of work which can be draining for everyone involved. Equally, this is at a time of declining civic involvement but increased policy use of the findings. A few local authorities challenged the results in their area. ONS made the mistake of defending the Census very bullishly (and in fairness, overall it was considered to have been the best for decades). However the reality is that if you are a local authority who faces a cut in your funding, you are not going to be interested or placated by the praise for the macro elements of the Census. ONS then found the news coverage of the Census being dominated by a handful of local authorities (and there are over 400 in England and Wales) complaining that the Census was wrong and should be re-done whilst elsewhere in the newspapers, journalists used the rich detail of demographic details voraciously and unquestioningly. In the event, ONS conducted extensive population studies in some of the contested areas, produced outstanding work and has now rebuilt and even improved relations with the local authorities concerned. In retrospect, ONS should have been more realistic when outlining the context of the headline figure.

GDP revisions incident

In September 2003, ONS revised the estimate for Q2 GDP growth from 0.3 to 0.6 percent, for valid reasons, the primary one of which was out of our control. This revision triggered extensive media coverage, with many economic journalists saying that we had "doubled" our estimate of economic growth. The timing of the release was also a couple of weeks before ONS's appearance in front of a parliamentary select committee so this also added to its high profile nature.

Our initial means of handling this was shaped by the press coverage and we were continually on the back foot about it. The UK Statistics Commission also announced that it would conduct a review of the figures, which to many observers appeared as confirmation of our perceived incompetence. After a couple of weeks, the tide changed slightly with the *Financial Times* publishing a survey which showed that we produce the first estimate of GDP faster relatively than most other developed economies and that our margin of revision is very small relatively. The select committee appearance also went smoothly and it provided me with an opportunity to set out the facts as to why the revision occurred. However it was an object lesson in how not to release a figure.

There was a lot of information we could have had ready to put into the public domain immediately the statistics were released which could have prevented much of the coverage and possibly the review as well. The Statistics Commission's review actually praised ONS and reiterated why revisions are a necessary part of statistical production, but its very existence still means that some journalists can write about the Commission finding it necessary to review our procedures, without making any reference to the fact that we came out of the review well. I also published an article in January 2004 in my name covering why revisions happen. This article was and remains well received but with the benefit of hindsight and better preparation, it would have made more sense to have published it at the same time as the Q2 GDP growth estimate was revised.

Select Committee hearings

Once a year, the most senior officials at ONS appear before the Treasury parliamentary select committee to answer questions on ONS's Annual Report. In reality, this means any part of the running of ONS is open to public scrutiny.

I made the mistake of 'rising to the bait' in a select committee hearing early on in my time at ONS. One of the Committee members asked me what I got in return for all of the mistakes we had made? I answered "A lot of abuse, in fact I must be the most abused civil servant in the country". I regretted these words as soon as I said them and they have come back to haunt me in every interview since. They have served as a continual reminder to me that throwaway lines do not work in newsprint and are stored for posterity. Any language which could be used by the press must be chosen carefully and used in context. However, I now answer the inevitable question about it with an acknowledgement that police, parole officers, nurses and teachers get much more abuse (which I truly believe) and that I am fortunate to have my job as I find it so stimulating and challenging. In summary, we realised that the best method of ensuring neutral press coverage at select committees is to appear as steady and thorough as possible.

2001 Census helpline failure

The 2001 Census was conducted whilst the country was affected by an outbreak of 'foot and mouth', a cattle-borne disease whose existence raised several logistical challenges for those involved in the Census. This resulted in a flood of calls to the Census helpline which caused it to fail. This could have been disastrous PR for the Census but we turned it to our advantage by talking about the incredible willingness of the British public to engage in their civic responsibilities. I am sure that presenting it in this manner helped increase overall levels of response to the 2001 Census.

How ONS practices and thinking have developed with these experiences

ONS now follows a number of processes to avert and manage incidents such as those outlined above in the case studies.

The key policy is that at ONS we operate with openness and transparency. This manifests itself in a number of practices with regard to the media:

- we write to the Statistics Commission, which publishes all of its correspondence, when we take any decision affecting the manner of release of statistics
- all of our business processes are in the public domain
- we have arranged seminars to inform users of current statistical methodology, for example the publication by ONS of 'revisions triangles' (enabling the user to see how an estimate has changed and evolved over time) was publicised through a revisions forum at the Bank of England with an audience of analysts, Bank staff, policy makers and journalists.

Other practices to support good relationships with the press

In ONS we have set up a number of working practices to support good relationships with the press:

- closer liaison between the press office and relevant business area when writing the press release and background notes, to ensure that potentially sensitive and therefore newsworthy issues are considered by media professionals
- closer collaboration between the press office and relevant business area to ensure timely delivery of material for the media
- making senior staff available to handle media calls immediately when ONS is aware that releases could generate press coverage
- media training for everyone who speaks to the press through a media accreditation programme
- strict adherence to the media handling guidelines for all staff
- giving considerable thought to statistical releases before publication, ensuring that the statistics are presented in context, particularly where there are unexpected changes in trends or there is a large change in an estimate when it is updated to include new data
- planning select committee evidence to ensure news value is low and on ONS's terms.

In addition I have worked to develop good relationships with senior economic commentators in the media, meeting them to discuss economic and statistical issues.

Policy for correcting inaccuracies in the media

ONS has developed a systematic policy towards correcting inaccuracies in the media. My own feeling is that in a statistical office as large as the UK's and one that operates within the political and media environment that we do, it is essential that a correction to any inaccuracy and any perception of inaccuracy is in the public domain as speedily as possible. ONS writes to the newspaper concerned any time that an article contains an inaccuracy. Newspapers do not always publish these letters. However we always publish them on the National Statistics website. This ensures that not only are the correct facts in the public domain but that key commentators know that the 'letters to the press' section of the website includes much useful information that outlines ONS policy. It is clear that although newspapers may not choose to print the letters sometimes, journalists find the content of them a useful reference point and select committees clearly use the information as part of their research. One of the elements that I am always keen to highlight is

the background to any issue. Users must have confidence that we are 'ahead of the curve'. If there is a mistake, we find it, we put it right and we make no secret of the chain of events.

Over time, journalists have come to appreciate and recognise our *modus operandi*. There is recognition and acceptance of the fact that we follow the National Statistics Code of Practice.

Appeal process

In the UK, if the press has got something wrong and refuses to correct it, then the next option is to use the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) as an arbitration body. ONS has done this twice during my tenure. In both instances the fact that we had gone to this body convinced the newspapers in question that we were serious and their response was to offer to run a correction. Their Code states that '*A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and - where appropriate - an apology published.*' The existence of the Code has not stopped the printing of inaccuracies but the threat of its deployment has ensured that letters have been published. However, as with everything, it is the fact that we have been able to demonstrate our processes and systems that has been central our ability to gather evidence to submit a complaint to the PCC.

Management of critical issues

Managing incidents is critical to the way in which the media form attitudes to the statistical office. Incidents can range from regular updates to published statistics, unscheduled changes to statistics or more serious incidents. The management of these, and the reporting of this by the media, can generate serious long term damage to public trust in the office, and the attitudes of stakeholders. This issue deserves special attention in any discussion of the media and official statistics.

When incidents arise in a statistical office there may well be little time to prepare a response which could affect the confidence in the institution for several years, and damage trust in other activities if poorly handled. Sometimes, not all is known about the problem. With market sensitive statistics, some problems such as mistaken early release or improper early access can necessitate actions which will come to the attention of regulatory authorities. With thought, difficult situations can be used to highlight positive aspects of the statistical system. In the UK statistical system, the management of incidents is an essential capability.

In managing any problem, what is always at stake is continuing, unqualified confidence both in major statistics, and in the hard judgements that we are trusted to make about politically sensitive statistics. Matters of trustworthiness of any statistical judgement can affect trust in the official statistical system, therefore although most issues arise from problems with individual statistics, they must always all be resolved in a way that recognises that our ways of working on all statistics will be assessed. The principles behind how we operate, and solve problems, should be obvious in both large and small incidents that bring our practices to the attention of the public. The action we take after knowing of a mistake is often more critical than making the mistake itself, and it is never too late to fix something wrong.

Situations that become critical should be actively managed – often the best remedy in handling a critical issue can be in managing down the potential emergence of an issue, even where the initial cost seems too high. If recovery of a problem is managed well and in a fully transparent manner, then positive attitudes to the means of fixing a problem may offset the odium from making the mistake. Speed of response is also important - rapid identification of problems and assessment of solutions will often enable a wider range of responses, and strengthen retrospective confidence in handling. It is often through acting independently and competently that we manage the tensions between independence and being a senior civil servant.

Three key non-negotiable principles

There are three non-negotiable principles of official statistics, which underpin and sustain trust in official statistics and the national statistics institute. These are:

- to protect the confidentiality of personal records
- to use objective methods in producing statistics and
- to maintain impartiality in the release of statistics.

These guiding principles underpin the working practices of official statisticians and should be used to help determine the course of action when dealing with difficult critical issues. We must show our unqualified commitment to the three principles by being willing to answer immediately criticism when they are challenged. Most often, it is the full disclosure of methods, impacts on statistics, and consequential methodological and process changes that usually resolves the concerns of critics.

Advice for managing incidents

- identify the problem fast, ensure that you know all aspects rapidly. Where problems of understanding arise, immediately get some of the best people involved to assess risk, and identify resolution, if the problem is technical or operational
- ensure that those who can fix an issue become aware of it rapidly. Raise the possibility of problems to highest necessary level for their resolution, at the time a problem seems likely, and do not wait until tests confirm certainty of problem
- issue management will involve at least one who must understand all aspects of an incident, from large and small, so that they can certify the validity of arguments as developed

- except in the rare case where personal neglect is a strong part of failure, do not plan on any penalty on individuals for incompetence or failure, because the prime interest is always in knowing the true situation. The National Statistician always takes external responsibility for all forms of failure.

Finding a solution

- assess the possible solutions
- use past experience as a guide
- use existing practices and principles as a guide for response
- always investigate and close down as far as possible any suggestion that creates doubt about whether standards have been maintained
- act with a view to the issue becoming public
- think about the impact in six months time and beyond of the immediate solution adopted
- burn scrub to save the forest if needed, in other words, for example, it is always best to admit an error with the consequent criticism, than wait until it might be found out by a very angry user
- ensure that it is judgement that is what is criticised, rather than our management competence, through actively deciding on responses to situations, rather than waiting for something else to trigger our attention
- where we cannot answer what caused a problem, we need to limit the possible causes through independent review of relevant processes

Publication and release of statistics

- never willingly publish incorrect information
- stick to the pre-announced release schedule, and standard processes in 'at risk' times such as elections
- never release information to a department or Ministers where the transaction cannot become publicly known, even if the information is confidential

Access to Microdata

- never use details obtained in a statistical enquiry for any use that is not either (a) official statistics or (b) research using anonymised records

Involvement of Ministers

- do not consult Ministers on matters reserved for the authority of the National Statistician
- all work done for Ministers (PQs, work reports, proposals and requests for decision) must all be of the highest standard, with a board member taking personal responsibility for the quality of all material sent to FST and other Ministers
- a well deserved respect for professional competence makes it much less likely for pressures to exist that challenge the political professional boundary of our work

Public response

- seek to be the first to identify a mistake in any National Statistics
- close down as far as possible any suggestion that creates doubt about whether standards have been maintained

- use other bodies to log responses as appropriate, such as the Financial Services Authority, or the Statistics Commission
- ensure that the whole office is aware of how we will respond to failings in areas of non-negotiable principles
- keep responsibility within ONS. Any one else blamed can become a loose cannon in defending themselves at your expense, and contradict and undermine assurances needed to repair goodwill

Unusual cases implying a different response

There can be rare occasions when a different response is required because of other significant factors that expand the case beyond one that can be dealt with within the bounds of usual statistical practices and procedures. These additional factors can include the following:

- regard to the duty of care we have as citizens to the immediate protection of children and others
- where it is for the courts to test whether a particular course of action is appropriate (but note that on issues of the principle in confidentiality, the only authorities that can override ONS are Parliament or the courts)
- the need to know the scale of an inadvertent revision to a critical market sensitive statistics, before we signal the revision
- we may well rely on the judgement of others in the expected application of a code principle, and other legal obligations

Case studies

Experience leads to some sound principles in disaster recovery, and ‘case law’ developed through solving difficult problems should be recorded and built on. Building up the folklore of the office around these cases is a critical way of ensuring that the fundamental principles behind official statistics can be shared, reinforced and sustained across more complex situations in the future.

Conclusion

The new media play a critical part that involves all aspects of the operation of a statistical service, some involving mainstream media and some quite specialist areas. The environment we work in is fast moving, sometimes intimidating, and always intrusive. Not only our work, but how we produce it is increasingly under scrutiny.

A number of common themes have emerged when the press coverage has been better than anticipated, as follows:

- the neutrality of the press coverage increases in direct relation to the thought and energy invested into the release beforehand
- the ability of the statistics office to ensure that all relevant staff are briefed in advance and that points of exposure are dealt with in advance ensures that the press find it harder to expose differences or weaknesses. It also ensures that press office can rebut criticisms speedily. It is better that journalists get a timely quote or background information from ONS, rather than contacting external organisations or individuals whose objective will be to ensure publicity for themselves and know that the chances of gaining this increase if they appear more contentious
- the availability of senior staff to speak to journalists; the measured tone of any subsequent reporting will reflect the authority of the explanations.

We need to hold fast to core principles and at the same time understand and be part of the milieu within which the public learns of what is going on. At this we need to be always quite excellent, either through our own new broadcasting face on the work, or through supporting the media with high quality, well involved interest, and a capacity to comment that reflects our role and place.