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**Non-professional user requirements of statistical dissemination**  
**- Some comments**

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# Dissemination of official statistics for the non-professional user

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Our users are a very different lot and so are their needs; they change over time and from situation to another. They are dynamic, not static. If we do not keep this in mind we will soon become very outdated. The non-professional users are extremely varied and are the group that requires the most varied solutions in communication. They are unlikely to have a great deal of knowledge about our data sources, the limitations of the data, the classifications we use and the reasons behind them nor the strengths and the weaknesses of the methodology applied. Communicating with them requires a special skill or aptitude which is normally not a part of the training of official statisticians.

Switching to internet based dissemination and communication policy is crucial. The internet allows us to communicate with our users at different levels. This applies to all our material, the statistics, the metadata, guides for the users and the textual and graphic explanations or analysis we may offer. The correct approach is to proceed from the simple to the complex. The internet is the preferred medium by the users. Many users are more comfortable with the internet than with paper publications, it is the quickest way of obtaining information, not least from different sources, and internet information is up-to-date and can be downloaded very easily.

The internet is an extremely flexible tool. The lead-time for internet publication is very short. It can be developed easily and makes it possible to offer personalized services. It allows us to expand our dissemination without major additional cost and to present our information at different platforms which is important for satisfying the demand of our most demanding users – the non-professionals.

The switch to internet based dissemination is likely to release resources. Against this, it is important to allocate resources to develop our website on a continuous basis, seeking new solutions which make the use of the website easier, quicker and more interesting for the user. For this, we might solicit the help of professional communication people. We need also to gauge the quality of the website on a regular basis and conduct user satisfaction surveys.

It is of paramount importance neither to sit back passively nor only to react to chance observation but to be proactive ensuring that we are ourselves in command of the development.

## **Introduction**

First of all, let me thank the three authors, Michel Glaude, Gunnar Sahlin and Aja Zigure, for the thought-provoking papers with which they have provided us for discussion in this session. The papers are quite varied in the subjects they tackle as well as in their scope and fittingly touch upon several aspects of our theme this afternoon.

The structure of our conference and the choice of topics involve both a certain amount of assertions and assumptions about the subject for discussion. This is not surprising nor is it a negative thing; on the contrary it shows that we are approaching the subject from a common and well known ground. In other words, this is basically a sign of the strength and the coordination of the European statistical system and its individual elements, the national statistical institutes.

The main heading of our conference of leaders of NSI's, *the challenge of communicating statistics*, is quite loaded. It asserts that to communicate statistics is no simple matter but a real challenge. It assumes that it is the role of the NSI's to communicate the statistics and hence that they have to respond to the challenge. This may sound trivial but that is not the case as I will return to later; for the moment it is sufficient to point out that we have in the not so distant past been quite occupied with discussing how to assign properly the different roles or functions of the statistical process to different players on the stage.

Another assertion of our conference is that the challenge of communicating statistics is a manifold one as it is seen to apply differently to different users. Again, this indicates how uniformly we have come to treat the subject; based on our experience and on our concourse we have deemed fit to distinguish between specific groups of users and to acknowledge that they have different needs which require different approaches and solutions.

## **Categorizing the users**

The programme of our conference is mainly structured in accordance with the conventional break-down of the different user groups. I have no quarrel with it as such; it is a reflection of the way in which we the NSI people have been thinking about our users, categorizing them and even labelling them. But it is tempting to stop right here and reflect a little on this break-down; is it the correct one in this day and age, is it helpful or is it perhaps out of date and misleading? Are the users or the user groups static phenomena? On the contrary; they evolve with changes in the technology of communication and rising level of computer and media skills and develop alongside with the development of the communication policies and practices of the NSI's. In other words; our

categorizations are conventionally static but we should be careful and think of our users in more dynamic terms.

I do not intend to discuss our categorizations in detail nor suggest that we alter them. But I think it may be useful to keep well in mind that the users are dynamic - as is the world we live in and hopefully our statistics as well – and that has a direct bearing on our communication strategies. This leads me to a few observations:

- First, the categories are not constant but evolving; what we observe and define as a specific category today may not be the same as yesterday and may not hold constant until tomorrow.
- Second, there will be a lot of dynamism within the categories. The degree of skills and capacity of the users to utilize our data is constantly developing and their degree of self-sufficiency or helplessness, which our information units deal with every day, is changing as well, mainly depending on how well or badly their abilities and technical equipment keep up with changes in technology.
- Third, each user may appear in more than one category depending on his or her interest and task at any given time. The user may be a researcher in one situation but a non-professional user in another, or in other words, he may appear as two users depending on the situation.
- Forth, within each group or category, there are many levels of users and each of the users may appear at more than one level; be very skilled in one situation and unskilled in another, request metadata in one situation and being hindered by it in another.

### **The non-professional users**

I have now spent considerable time and used complicated words and phrases to point out something quite simple which can of course be stated in very simple terms: Our users are a very different lot and so are their needs; they change over time and from one situation to another. We had better keep this in mind all the time; otherwise, we will soon become very outdated.

This applies not least to the user group we have for the sake of convenience labelled the non-professionals. Although the labels *researchers* and *professionals* may hide considerable differences it seems evident that the group of *non-professionals* is the most varied one and the least homogeneous of the lot. (This is also clearly indicated in the paper by Zigure.) This is also the group that requires the most varied solutions in communication and may be the most difficult one to deal with or satisfy. Let me explain briefly what I have in mind in saying this.

The researchers and the professional users would seem in many cases to have much more clearly defined needs or demands than the non-professionals. While they may require assistance in defining the data, the series, the classifications and the methodology that are most likely to aid them in their research or professional tasks, these are the groups which we the data providers find the easiest to talk to. We the providers and they the users are on quite a common ground as regards familiarity with the subject under scrutiny, to some extent the data, the methodology and we share the professional language to a certain extent. We the data providers are educated or trained to deal and communicate with this type of users and we can safely assume at the outset that we will not be much surprised by the requests we receive from them.

The situation as regards the non-professional users of statistics is quite different in my opinion. The non-professionals are very heterogeneous, they come from a wide variety of backgrounds, their level of education is very different and the same applies to their technical skills. They are not very likely to have a great deal of knowledge about our data sources, the limitations of the data, the classifications which we use and the reasons behind them nor the strengths and the weaknesses of the methodology applied. Their interests or needs are extremely varied, from in depth studies of some phenomena to the most trivial things. We are further from sharing the same grounds with the non-professionals than with the professionals and we cannot use the same professional language or reference frames as when we discuss our statistics with the researchers or the professional users. Moreover, we the statisticians have not been educated or trained to communicate with the non-professionals. Communicating with them requires a special skill or aptitude that is normally not a part of the training of official statisticians.

### **Communicating at different levels**

Our different user groups and the heterogeneity of the group of non-professional users, indicates that we need to disseminate our statistics in various forms and communicate at many different levels with our users. At the same time, it is clear that our human, technical and financial resources for dissemination are limited.

The development of the dissemination technology in the last few years has been very advantageous for both the NSI's and the users of official statistics. The internet has become the main channel for dissemination of official statistics. While it can be said that we started to utilize the internet hesitatingly it is now clear that we are most of us using it as the main means of communicating with our users. As I mentioned earlier, only a few years ago we were busy designing a complicated dissemination strategy using a combination of different media which we judged to be best suited to reach our different user groups. We were also quite conscious of the fact that there might be a

market for our information and a market for communicating our information. In such a world there was room for several functions and actors, we discussed wholesale and retail of statistics and the role of brokers or intermediaries that might be better suited than ourselves for specializing in communicating with our customers. And we spent many hours trying to formulate an effective and equitable pricing policy for sorting out the demand and supporting the rising cost of disseminating our products in several different ways.

Gone are these days and we should be grateful for that. Modern information and communication technology (ICT) has become accessible to the great majority of people in our countries. Not only is the young generation brought up using it but it is also to a considerable extent embraced by the generation born well before the world of PC's, e-mail and internet. With the increasing use of the internet, the cost of dissemination of official statistics has fallen markedly. Utilizing the internet has made our previous calculations of the marginal cost of dissemination irrelevant. Together with the public-good nature of our products and the official policies of making ICT accessible to the citizens at large, this has led many NSI's to utilize the internet for offering maximum exposure to their products free of charge. As is the case in my office, many NSI's have taken the full step of switching to internet dissemination as the main method of dissemination but offering paper products as secondary products on demand.

In my opinion, this step or this change in dissemination and communication policy is very important, even crucial. It changes the whole way of thinking about the communication as it directs the attention to maximizing the use of the internet. At the same time, such a switch is likely to release a substantial amount of human and financial resources which can then be diverted to increase the accessibility, the user friendliness and the content of website of the NSI. In particular, this policy change lays the ground for maximizing the possibilities offered by the internet for flexibility in disseminating the statistics and communicating with the users at different levels according to their needs and skills.

### **Internet dissemination for the non-professional user**

The internet is at present by far the best medium for disseminating statistics to our non-professional users. There are several reasons for this. A major reason is the flexibility of the internet, in particular the possibilities it offers for presenting the material in a structured way at different levels or platforms. This applies to all the material, the statistics themselves, the metadata, product descriptions or guides to the users, and the textual or graphic explanations or analysis we may offer. What seems particularly fitting is to proceed from the simple to the complex. Starting with the simple is particularly important in the case of the non-professional or casual users; it will help them

along while not being a hindrance for the professional or the very frequent users. Another important feature of this approach is that it also provides a good overview of the material which is something both the non-professional and the professional users will appreciate. In the case of the statistics or the data, these should be offered at varying levels of break-down or detail, allowing the extracts to graduate from the simple to the detailed and complex. In the case of the metadata, this needs to be clearly structured with distinctions drawn between general descriptions of the material aimed at laymen and non-statisticians and the more technical metadata on data sources, definitions, classifications, methodology and reliability. As regards explanatory or analytical texts, these should start with short, simple overviews or main findings with links to a fuller text and/or whole reports on the subject at hand.

Another very good reason for concentrating on the internet is that it is the preferred medium by the users. Most of our users, non-professionals no less than professionals, much prefer searching for data or articles on the internet to searching for the same in a paper publication on a library shelf. There are several explanations to this as far as I can see:

- Very many users, students, journalists or media people and probably the younger generation at large are more familiar or comfortable with the PC and the internet than with paper publications, even to the extent that they have a greater confidence in internet based information than the printed one.
- Internet information is usually the most up-to-date one available.
- The internet is the quickest way of obtaining information, in particular obtaining information from many different sources.
- The user can easily and quickly download the data or the statistics for immediate utilization in his or her PC.

What I tend to think of as the flexibility of the internet is another very good reason for using it as the main vehicle for disseminating official statistics, not least to the non-professional users. Here I am for instance referring to the following:

- The lead-time for internet publication is very short. It allows us to update our statistics or publish new things very quickly and with a minimum of fuss.
- It is very easy to change the website and adapt it to changes in demand and to the observed wishes of the users.

- It makes it possible to offer personalized services, such as allowing the user to subscribe to particular information or to create his own homepages with automatic updates.
- It allows us to present our information at different platforms and thus to be better able to satisfy the demand of our most demanding users – the non-professional ones.
- It allows us to expand our dissemination and the exposure of our data without and major additional cost.

I mentioned previously that the switch from the traditional to internet based dissemination is likely to release resources. However, it is important that these resources are to some extent used for developing and strengthening the internet dissemination. Here, I can think of at least two basic issues that we need to give constant attention to. One is that we must allocate resources on a continuous basis to develop the website. Such development involves seeking new web solutions, in particular solutions which increase the user friendliness of the website and make its use easier, quicker and more interesting for the user. For this we may involve trained communication people in the design of our website as well as the way in which we present our information there as well as on paper. We might also utilize such experts for educating ourselves, the statisticians, about the art of communicating our precious information to the users.

Another issue that requires attention and resources is to be active in gauging the strength of our website, the demand for services and the satisfaction of the user as regards the way in which we are fulfilling his or her needs. Here, there are two methods at hand, hiring outside expertise for trying out and dissecting our website and conducting regular satisfaction surveys among the users. This is of particular importance as regards the non-professional users as we are probably more likely to be in frequent and direct contact with our professional users than the non-professional ones.

Through measures of the kind I have outlined here we make sure that we are not sitting back passively while the world goes by and that we are not only reacting to what we may observe by chance. Rather, we are being proactive making sure that we are ourselves setting the course and being in command of the development.