

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA

A GUIDE
FOR STATISTICAL
ORGANIZATIONS



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Preface

The methodological material *Communicating with the Media: a Guide for Statistical Organizations* was prepared within the framework of the UNECE Work Sessions on Dissemination of Statistical Output to Information Media under the programme of work of the Conference of European Statisticians¹. It is a distillation of experience over the years and draws from the numerous papers and presentations from the meetings on this topic.

The present *Guide* was prepared by an expert group in cooperation with the UNECE secretariat. The following people were responsible for writing the individual chapters:

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As each chapter has been written by a different author, the publication reflects their personal touch and style.

Laszlo Holka (Hungarian Central Statistical Office) did a considerable amount of work in systematizing the different source documents and compiling the first draft of the Guide. Yael Nathan (Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel) and Angela Schaff (Federal Statistical Office of Germany) contributed to the material. Colleen Blessing did the overall editing of the publication. John Flanders from Statistics Canada helped to tighten up the text. Tiina Luige from UNECE secretariat coordinated the work.

¹ For more information on the Conference of European Statisticians and its work programme, see: <http://www.unece.org/stats/>

This printed, pocket-book version of the *Guide* is intended to serve as a quick reference. It presents the main principles and general overview of the issues to be considered by a statistical organization when communicating with the media. An index is attached to assist readers in finding the required topic. A more extended version of the *Guide* including examples from individual countries can be found on the website:

<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/media/guide>.

The Internet version of the Guide is being developed by the expert group mentioned above.

This material represents an extensive voluntary effort on the part of the authors. The editors express their appreciation and thanks to all authors of chapters, as well as to all members of the expert group and participants of the Work Sessions on Dissemination of Statistical Output to Information Media who contributed to the preparation of this publication.

Introduction

The first thing to understand about journalists is that most are uncomfortable with numbers. Many journalists are unable to calculate a percentage increase. Many more would find it difficult to explain the difference between a percentage decline and a percentage point decline. Most also find data boring.

At the same time, however, journalists know that there are stories somewhere in the data. And they are becoming more aware that there are stories that cannot be told properly without resorting to statistics of one kind or another.

As a rule, it's fair to say that journalists and statisticians have little in common. Yet, journalists and national statistical agencies are virtually inseparable. Why? Because the general public is an important audience for national statistical agencies, and the news media is a powerful tool for reaching this audience.

The challenge for a national statistical organization is to help journalists understand the data. Putting it simply, tell them a story. Tell them about the world they live in. Tell them how their numbers help the public understand what they see around them as they drive to work every morning and watch the news on television every night.

Done poorly, a news release may never reach the public, or its contents may be misinterpreted. Done well, however, a news release provides a unique opportunity for the organization to speak directly to its audience, to inform them on vital issues, and to demonstrate the value and importance of its programmes for society.

This booklet is intended as a practical guide to assist countries that are setting up a national statistical organization to communicate effectively with the media, and in turn, with the general public. It does not pretend to solve every problem that a national statistical organization will face. However, it offers the best advice from those statistical agencies that have been doing the job for years, to those who may be just starting out.

PRINCIPLES, OBJECTIVES AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES IN DATA DISSEMINATION



1.1. Principles of dissemination

Dissemination to the media is based on the same core principles that underlie the general dissemination activities of a national statistical organization.

Relevance: The information should be relevant to the social, economic and general conditions of the country and meet the needs of both public and private decision makers. For the media, relevance translates into newsworthiness. The statistical organization needs to present the importance of its statistical information in a manner that will attract coverage in the news media and stimulate the interest of the general public.

Confidentiality: All data collected by the national statistical organization must protect the confidentiality of individual respondents, whether persons or businesses. The organization should not release any information that identifies an individual or group without prior consent. In this respect, the organization must not divulge information that undermines the confidentiality of its respondents. This applies to the media no less than to any other client of the organization.

Objectivity: Information should be independent of political control. It should be as objective and as impartial as possible.

Timeliness: Information should be current and released as soon as possible after the reference period. However, data that are two or three years old can still be newsworthy in certain circumstances.

Accessibility: Both data and metadata should be publicly available in appropriate formats and through appropriate delivery channels. The statistical organization should ensure that the media, like other clients, are able to access

information on statistical methods, concepts, variables and classifications that underlie all statistical decisions.

Adherence to these core dissemination principles will enhance the credibility of the national statistical organization and build public trust in the reliability of the information it produces.

1.2. Objectives of dissemination

The vast majority of the general population is unlikely to ever consult the national statistical organization directly. For most citizens, the news media provide their only exposure to official statistics. It is through effective communication with the media, therefore, that the national statistical organization can achieve two important dissemination objectives:

- to inform the general public about the latest releases of official statistics on the social, economic and general conditions of the country;
- to demonstrate the relevance of its statistical information to both the general public and to government, so that it can anticipate greater public support for its programs and increase public awareness of its products and services.

The extent to which the national statistical organization can communicate effectively with and through the media has an enormous impact on how well it can achieve these objectives.

Thus, it is in the best interest of the national statistical organization to build a strong working relationship with the media, to promote the news value of its latest releases and to make it easy for the media to report on them in an accurate, timely and informative manner.

1.3. Understanding the media

To communicate effectively with the media, the national statistical organization must understand the profile of their media community. This calls for an awareness of the types of media in the region, the needs of these media and their coverage area, so that the statistical organization can provide customized services that meet their various information needs.

Traditionally, the media have encompassed newspapers, radio and television. However, the relative importance of these media vehicles has evolved over time. Today, television is the primary news source for citizens of industrialized countries. However, radio stations and newspapers still have their individual roles to play in the dissemination of statistical information.

Newspapers can provide more detailed coverage of statistical releases. A headline in a major daily newspaper often sets the agenda for television and radio coverage.

The scope of these traditional media channels has been further extended through financial news agencies which serve as important intermediaries in the information industry and through the Internet news sites associated with most major media channels, whether print, radio or television.

The Internet, in fact, has become an important tool of dissemination for statistical agencies. Statistical agencies with a website can now communicate directly with the public, a fact which is revolutionizing the dissemination of information. This means that information on the statistical organization's website must be written in such a way that it is understood by the vast majority of the public.

In addition, information released by the statistical organization may appear on a media outlet's website within minutes of release. This makes not only for easier access to the statistical information

published by the statistical agencies. It can also foster statistical literacy in the general population.

The key to building a strong working relationship with the media is to understand who they are and how best to meet their information needs in a manner that is both proactive and user-friendly. The measure of success lies in the extent to which the different news media use the latest information releases and the extent to which the information is reported with accuracy.

1.4. Management issues

In setting up a national statistical organization, management must come to grips with a number of key issues concerning dissemination to the media. It might be preferable to develop policies on many of these issues, which include:

Allocating resources: The national statistical organization must first decide how much it wants to spend on media relations. Financial resources are not infinite. An organization's wish to be as helpful to the media as possible must be counterbalanced by a program that fits within its available budget.

Pre-release of data: National statistical organizations may wish to develop a policy concerning the pre-release of statistical data to the media under embargo. This system provides an opportunity for journalists to digest the information and build their storyline before the data are officially placed into the public domain.

However, it also places the integrity of the national statistical organization at risk if the embargo is not honoured. An alternative to an embargo system is the media lock-up. Under this system, members of the media are "confined" to a media room for a certain period of time to give them an advance look at the day's news releases and let them prepare their stories for transmission precisely at release time. While the lock-up reduces

the risk of unauthorized pre-release, accessibility is limited to journalists working in the region of the national statistical organization.

Media monitoring and response to erroneous statements:

National statistical agencies may wish to establish a system to monitor the news media which serve them regularly. This is fundamental to measuring how extensively the media have covered the releases of new statistical information, and how accurately the information has been reported.

In instances where journalists misinterpret or erroneously report the data, it can benefit the national statistical organization to request a correction in the media, either informally or formally. This ensures that the public is not misled by the erroneous report, and protects the national statistical organization's reputation for accuracy and reliability.

Media relations and official spokespersons: Members of the media frequently call national statistical organizations to seek information to help them prepare their articles. In that vein, agencies may wish to prepare a policy concerning media requests for interviews, as well as providing comments on programme issues and data interpretation. The national statistical organization can provide a list of media spokespersons, designated experts on topical subjects, who are directly accessible to journalists.

While collaboration between subject matter experts and journalists can result in enhanced media coverage, difficulties can arise when statistical experts deal with journalists who are in most cases generalists. To ensure standard messages for media consumption that are not confused by inappropriate detail, it is important that such spokespersons receive media training. It is also important to ensure that spokespersons are easily accessible to the press, particularly at the time new statistical information is released.

Fees and charges for products and services: Whether to charge the media for information is an important management issue for national statistical organizations that set a price for all or some of their products and services. The range of products and services provided free of charge to the media varies, as do the prices and/or discounts offered to the media by these statistical organizations. Recognition of the special role of the media as gatekeepers to the public, coupled with the diminishing marginal cost of Internet dissemination, however, is gradually increasing the amount of data and the quality of services available to the media at no charge.

Government authorities: The pre-release of statistical data to government authorities may give rise, justified or not, to media allegations of censorship, tampering with or suppression of data which will undermine public trust in the objectivity of the data released by the national statistical organization. The pre-release of data to government authorities, therefore, must be undertaken with a clear message that this does not undermine the power of the national statistical organization to release statistical data without prior clearance from outside policy officials.

ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS OF DISSEMINATION



Organizing statistical offices for optimal communication with the media.

2.1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the **organizational aspects** of statistical dissemination to the media: the structures, the division of responsibilities and the instruments and tools that have to be set up within a statistical office, in order to make efficient dissemination of statistical information to the media possible. This organizational perspective is distinguished from two other perspectives:

The **managerial or policy perspective** is about strategic decisions, as a rule by the general management or the political authorities, with regard to the broader orientations of dissemination policy and relationships with the media. These aspects of information dissemination were discussed in Chapter 1.

The **operational perspective** addresses the concrete procedures that are developed and implemented in order to disseminate and communicate on a day-to-day basis. Operational aspects are discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2, therefore, is not about why some things should be done, but about creating the structures and instruments making it possible to do them. Because some topics may not only be considered from an organizational point-of-view but also from a policy or an operational one (or both), they are also treated in other chapters. This is necessary, although it may look like an overlap, because the different angles should be treated in a coherent way across topics.

Recent technological changes have had a large impact on disseminating statistics to the media. These changes all tend in the same direction: dissemination has become a lot faster and easier. As a result, expectations have been raised, and the media

are demanding more material, more rapidly. But technology itself is not enough to ensure more efficient data dissemination. If the statistical 'back office' is not sufficiently well organized, it will be difficult to exploit technological innovations to meet higher expectations.

Chapter 2 begins with the most basic and fundamental organizational issues and then moves to more specific discussions:

- The place of media services within the statistical office;
- The handling of release calendars;
- How different data types require different dissemination strategies;
- The promotion of major surveys and press releases;
- How to organize to deal with negative press coverage;
- How to monitor results;
- When and how to outsource.

2.2. Media services within the statistical office: structuring the statistical office for optimal contacts with the media

If the media are to be provided with statistical information efficiently, either actively or in response to a data demand, structures within the statistical office must be set up.

Responsibilities must be assigned to those structures, and the staff within them, and means of working together have to be devised. Furthermore, the necessary instruments, such as databases of dissemination data and contact information, must be created and continually updated.

The basic question within this context is: **What 'statistical needs' do the media have?** Or, put differently: What kind of questions can be expected from the media?

A number of possible answers:

- Getting in touch, finding a contact, finding a spokesperson or commentator;
- Being alerted to news;
- Obtaining a ready-made, newsworthy copy likely to interest their audience or readership;
- Finding background material for articles or broadcasts;
- Obtaining metadata, information about status of data or their interpretation.

To satisfy each of these data demands, two organizational issues have to be tackled.

- An **organizational chart** must be drawn up that clearly spells out responsibilities, including those beyond the media services in the strict sense: the statistical services as well as the technical and Information Technology (IT) support services, which are also implicated in providing data to the media.
- All necessary **instruments** must be developed and maintained, again in close cooperation with the statistical and technical support services: dissemination databases, interrogation tools, all kinds of dissemination software.

2.3. Release calendars: releasing data on schedule

The media need advance notice of data releases. They would probably welcome it for most, if not all, released data. But this is particularly important for short-term economic indicators.

An essential task for any statistical office is to prepare a calendar for releasing data, to distribute the calendar widely and, even more importantly, to respect it scrupulously. Release calendars can be dangerous things: it probably is more damaging to publish a release date, and not meet it, than not to set and publish one at all.

Release dates may be broad periods, for example, within a particular month, or they may be precise, to the hour, minute and second of release. The more precisely a statistical agency announces a release time, the more demanding it becomes to meet it.

Aspects that need addressing:

- Which data releases – based on type of indicator or frequency – need to be announced in a calendar?
- What are the basic conditions, in terms of organization, processes and back-up procedures, for ensuring a foolproof data delivery and scrupulous respect for announced release times?
- Releasing according to a strict schedule requires a change in mentality within the organization with respect to awareness of media expectations, more client-oriented attitudes and more commitment. How can this change in mentality be promoted?

2.4. Data types, formats and dissemination strategies: the best way to disseminate statistical information

Statistical output can vary across a number of dimensions:

- It can take the form of text, tables, graphs, maps, pictures, spoken words or a combination of one or more of these.

- It can be mass-produced for mass-dissemination or it can be tailor-made, targeting the specific needs of a small group, or even an individual client.
- It can be disseminated on paper or electronically, via mail, fax, e-mail, diskette, CD-ROM or through a website (static pages, dynamic pages or even database access). Data can also be transmitted orally by telephone or face-to-face conversation.

It is important to identify the various statistical products media require, and to select the most user-friendly and cost-efficient way of delivering them. The choice between disseminating data electronically or distributing it on paper is part of a larger discussion concerning producing and disseminating data to the media.

Four different types of statistical output for the media can be distinguished:

- Alerts and notices announcing new releases of indicators and data, web or paper publications;
- News releases and articles that are ‘pre-digested’ and more or less ready-to-print or broadcast;
- Databases containing background material for a journalist’s article or item. These may range from a few figures to extensive data files;
- Metadata: information about how statistical data were obtained, their status and how they should be interpreted.

Each of these categories of statistical output for the media requires distinct optimal formats and distinct dissemination procedures. Once a decision is made about the best way for each of the

categories, dissemination processes have to be organized to implement that decision.

2.5. Promotion of major surveys and key releases: minimizing antagonism, maximizing goodwill

When statistical offices embark on a major survey or want to disclose important statistical data, it is essential to involve the media in a positive way, because in many ways they can be of great assistance:

- The media can, with little or no extra cost to the statistical office, enormously increase the public's awareness of the survey or release.
- If their reporting is done in a positive fashion, the media can foster a co-operative or receptive mood in the public. This can avoid hostility or over-critical reactions, as well as an unwillingness to participate in surveys.

If the media for whatever reason were to attack a survey or release, they could do a lot of harm, possibly even jeopardizing the whole project or the agency. Consequently, it is crucial for the statistical agency to make a determined effort to maximize goodwill with the media before embarking on a major statistical operation involving the public. To do so, the necessary structures and procedures have to be developed and put into place.

Some issues to consider:

- How to draw up a media communications plan for major statistical undertakings?
- How to assign responsibilities and set up structures to implement the plan?

- How to react in case of unforeseen circumstances (the most severe of which is a media crisis, discussed in Chapter 6)?

2.6. Dealing with negative press coverage: how to organize statistical office defenses

The topic of negative press coverage and, more extremely, how to handle a real media crisis, is treated more in-depth in Chapter 6, “Handling media crises”. However, organizational aspects are discussed here briefly.

Items for discussion:

- Where is the dividing line between being prepared for any contingency and being too prepared, which can be very expensive?
- What division of responsibilities should be established to deal with the different levels of media mishaps, from honest mistakes to real antagonism or a hidden agenda? What are the respective roles of the statistical office’s political authorities, general management and press services?

2.7. Measuring the impact: how to evaluate the effectiveness of working through the media

It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of working with and through the media, in order to adjust if necessary. A first step is to set up monitoring systems, which may range from deceptively simple to extremely sophisticated.

Some possibilities:

- Newspaper clippings, providing information on quantitative and qualitative media coverage;

- Analysis of web “hits”;
- Customer satisfaction surveys;
- Public image measurement;
- Changes in survey response rates.

The challenge: how to choose the best possible mix of monitoring systems to determine how effective data dissemination to the media is and how it can be improved.

2.8. Outsourcing: how to pay others to do the work

In the area of servicing the media, as in others, it sometimes makes better sense to let others do a specific job, if they have more experience, if they are better at it, or if they can do it more cheaply.

Outsourcing, however, does not mean that the work can be handed out and then forgotten. Outsourced jobs have to be closely watched before, during and after their execution.

They must be planned carefully in advance, their execution has to be monitored meticulously and continually, and results have to be checked thoroughly.

Some questions to be resolved:

- Which jobs can and cannot be outsourced? What is the relative importance of possible decision criteria such as cost, control over timeliness and quality, and speed of execution? Are there any other relevant criteria?

- What structures, division of tasks and assignment of responsibilities have to be foreseen within the statistical office in order to outsource efficiently and effectively?

METHODS AND TOOLS



This chapter presents information on communicating with the media from an operational perspective:

- How to obtain more publicity or exposure for statistics;
- How to write a good press release;
- How to effectively disseminate statistical information;
- Who should speak to the media.

3.1. How to obtain more publicity/exposure

Overview

The classic way to communicate with the media is by news release. This is a brief summary written in a way that journalists find “user-friendly”, and which gives them interesting and newsworthy information in a format that requires little effort on their part to create good copy. The release can be about a new report, new data or a new program.

The news release must be written to grab the attention of journalists and to fit into their agenda, and it must be presented in language they and the public can understand. Statistical offices must decide about the timing and method of disseminating the releases.

Finally, statistical offices must establish high credibility. Their information must be reliable and trustworthy. They must adhere to their published calendars for releases and make spokespeople available. Good credibility will encourage journalists to use, and even seek out, information from the statistical office.

Establish a dissemination schedule

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is useful to set up a regular dissemination schedule to notify the media about upcoming releases, and when to expect them. To allow the media to plan ahead, information should be provided regularly, in advance, regarding future news releases, statistics and reports.

Once the schedule has been established, the statistical office should stick to it, especially for statistics that have potential impact on financial markets. Meeting publication dates requires a great deal of discipline inside agencies. It also helps maximize the coverage of the releases because reporters are expecting the information.

If the release time cannot be trusted, the media may question the reliability and accuracy of the published statistical information. Sometimes the dissemination schedule is so newsworthy that newspapers publish it as news itself.

Write media-friendly news releases

One way to achieve more publicity for statistics is to disseminate newsworthy, media-friendly news releases. Tips for writing better releases are provided later in this chapter.

Newspapers are commercial businesses that have rigid deadlines. They also want to produce a product their customers will like. A statistical agency will go a long way to capture the attention of the media by presenting the statistics as a coherent story, rather than just facts and numbers, and by keeping the story clear, concise and simple.

Release at a time convenient to the media

Different news media have different preferences regarding the time of day that information is made public.

Traditionally, journalists appreciate receiving the information early in the day, because this allows them time to conduct supplemental research. Likewise, television journalists will have time to work with the information before their evening newscast, and print journalists will have plenty of time to meet their deadline for the following day's edition.

Internet-based newspapers often publish statistical news minutes after release time. They can accept news releases almost any hour of the day.

Some statistical agencies feel they receive better coverage if material is released at the beginning or the middle of the week, rather than on Friday. While some news organizations have few journalists working on Sundays, their workload may not be that heavy. Consequently, information released on Sundays may stand a better chance of being published than releases issued in mid-week when the news situation is more competitive.

Briefings and news conferences

Some countries have found that journalists don't like to attend press conferences. Others have used them successfully.

Journalists are always in a hurry. Newspapers receive many invitations to press conferences every day, and editors have to decline most of them. Be selective when inviting reporters to a press conference. Hold them only when there is a major story, such as the availability of a new report, the release of census data, and so on.

More modest and/or more intimate forms of press briefings provide an opportunity for subject matter specialists to answer questions face-to-face, and to provide interviews.

The habits and expectations of journalists in different countries are different. Experiment with alternative formats and schedules to see what works best.

3.2. News releases

What is a news release? It is the release of information that you hope the media will cover; a story you hope will be interesting to the public; a tight package much different from your statistical reports.

The terminology for a news release varies in different statistical agencies – First Release, News Release, Press Release. Releases concerning metadata or containing background material may be called News Bulletin, Note to Editors (or Correspondents), or Media Advisory.

Who writes the release?

Statistical agencies generally use one of three models for writing news releases:

Model 1: The releases are written by the subject-matter specialists. The press office just disseminates the releases to the media. Using guidelines on how to write a good release, statisticians can become skilled in writing their own releases. In this case, statisticians are not only permitted, but required to deal with enquiries in their areas of expertise.

Model 2: Subject-matter specialists write a draft of the release, which is sent to the Director who reads all news releases prior to their dissemination so he has an opportunity to make comments.

Model 3: Professional journalists or staff in the press office receive information from the statisticians. They write all releases in a journalistic style.

Content of the news release

Write a release only if you have a story to tell. Don't write a release because it is the routine thing to do. Remember: the story is not that you finished a report or have some data. The story is what the report had to say, or what the data mean.

On occasion, consider doing a release because of the importance of the matter or because of an unexpected event. You are writing a story you want the media to communicate to the public.

How to write a good release

News releases are written for journalists who are often working under time pressures. As a result, the release should be designed to meet the needs of that target group. Some guidelines:

- Write in simple, concise language. The text should be news-oriented: the most newsworthy information should come first, with details and supporting facts following later.
- Begin the release with a lead paragraph, similar to a newspaper article, which captures the attention of the reader, as well as capturing the general message of the data.
- Include an explanation of terms (perhaps a facts box) at the end, if needed. The news release should also identify a contact person, with a phone number, to whom the media can turn for additional information. It is also helpful to provide an Internet address for a website that contains auxiliary information.
- Follow established news release format and layout, including succinct information that journalists can easily reprocess and repackage.

- Effective press releases are usually about one page long. They should be no longer than two or three pages. Journalists do not have time to read lengthy news releases. Writing too much will ensure that the release will end up in the recycle box.

Specific guidelines

- **Headlines:** The headline (or title) of the release often determines the fate of the entire release. The headline helps the reporter decide whether to keep reading or throw it away, so its composition is considered an art in itself. It should be catchy and interesting, yet exact, and it should capture the essence of the story. Statisticians often think headlines are sensational or misleading because they don't tell the whole story. Remember: headlines are written to capture the attention of the reader. Explain the details later. A good headline should be one line long, at most two.
- **Leads:** The lead is the first paragraph of the release. It should be arresting, while summing up in four or five extremely concise sentences everything about the information. The lead should be an easy-to-read, short paragraph, not a large block of text. When in doubt, break a long paragraph into two smaller paragraphs. In composing the lead paragraph, authors should condense the meat of the story, presenting only the most interesting aspects. Think of the main message before starting to write. Otherwise, the lead might turn into a table of numbers in words.
- **Inverted pyramid style:** Writing in the inverted pyramid style means that the most important messages or data must be at the top of the release. Subsidiary points follow in order of decreasing importance. This style is designed

to enable the journalist to assess the newsworthiness of the release at a glance.

The body of the release should describe details of the event or report, arranged in order of their importance, with a constant tie-in to the headline and lead. An effective release might also contain a quote from an expert, or the head of the statistical agency.

In the inverted pyramid style, the conclusions are introduced at the beginning of the text, rather than at the end, in contrast to the style used in scientific studies. The first few sentences should contain only a few numbers, if any. This style of writing is sometimes difficult for academic people to master.

Statistics are all about changes: up, down, new high, new low. Readers want to know what is new, what is different. The author of the release must make the figures interesting by communicating enough detail to convey the key message without getting lost in those details. There is no need to explain in great detail how the data were collected.

- **Jargon free:** Make the text short and free of jargon. Spell out all acronyms. The release should be simple to understand even for a journalist who is not familiar with the topic being presented. Where possible, keep the numbers short. For example, use 30 million instead of 29,888,632.
- **Graphs and tables:** Consider using one table with full results, but keep the table simple. Alternatively, add a simple graph or figure to show trends or relationships. Make sure all units of measure, bars, lines, pie slices, table rows and columns are clearly labeled. Refer to the table or graph at the appropriate place in the text so journalists will know to which part of the text the table or graph is connected. Make the data used in the graph available so

that news organizations can use them and create their own graphs. Use graphs only to illustrate a point. Readers who are unaccustomed to dealing with statistics might be frightened or confused by too many complicated graphs and diagrams.

- **Headings and bullets:** Use headings when possible to break the text into manageable portions. Headings should be bold-faced, not underlined, because underlined text can be mistaken for a hyperlink in the online version. Use short, bulleted lists rather than long text lists. Journalists can scan lists much faster than they can read a long paragraph. Don't be afraid to use one-sentence paragraphs for effect.
- **Source information:** Mention your statistical agency as the official source of the data in the lead paragraph, as in: Fact, fact, fact, "as released today by (name of the statistical office)," or "according to the report released today by the (name of the statistical office)". If possible, the agency logo should appear in a prominent position on the first page. The agency's credibility rises if the public knows the source of the information.

3.3. Methods of disseminating information to the media

Statistical agencies can use a single means of distributing information to the media, or a combination. Some of these methods are in their infancy, while others are being used extensively.

Regardless of the method, the various media must receive the information simultaneously. At most statistical offices, the press office or information department is responsible for disseminating press releases.

Fax: Most statistical agencies believe faxing releases is old-fashioned despite the fact that many news editors still want a paper version as a complementary source to an e-mail or website version.

E-mail: Sent out simultaneously and automatically at a specified time.

Website: The Internet now is probably the most important channel for disseminating news releases. All statistical agencies publish news releases on the Internet. This can be combined with e-mails to editors or individual journalists.

WAP (Wireless Application Protocol): Wireless Application Protocol empowers mobile users with wireless devices including mobile phones, pagers and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) to access information easily. Some statistical offices use WAP to disseminate a few key economic indicators such as the Consumer Price Index, gross domestic product, retail sales index and unemployment rate.

SMS (Short Message Service): Short Message Service allows customers to send and receive text messages to and from mobile telephones. Some journalists at business newspapers have inquired about receiving key economic indicators by SMS to their cellular phone. However, so far no statistical agencies are disseminating facts and figures by SMS.

Other new dissemination methods: Video and radio outlets have particular needs that often are not met by the traditional news release or news event. Some offices have used a wide variety of techniques to meet this new demand, including video news releases, video news feeds, satellite media tours, stock shots for television, public service announcements, special event videos, radio media tours, audio news releases, daily radio programs, digital photographs and national news briefings. Internet technologies, such as streaming video and audio and even simple

e-mail, allow a statistical agency to reach a large number of journalists. As these technologies improve and proliferate, the Internet will offer many opportunities to communicate with the media.

Press Conferences and Briefings: As discussed earlier in this chapter, press conferences may or may not be an effective way to reach the media. Some reporters want to work from their desks. The electronic media may want sound bites or news clips for radio and television available at news conferences.

Holding a news conference requires advance planning, such as:

- Inviting the media;
- Securing a briefing room;
- Preparing a press package (handouts, including the);
- Preparing visual aids (PowerPoint slides or large charts);
- Arranging for visitors to enter the building and find the briefing room;
- Allotting space for camera crews;
- Ensuring power for video, lighting, recording devices and so on;
- Reserving microphones, or boom microphones, so the audience can hear the questions.

Lock-ups: Several statistical offices have successfully conducted media briefings under a lock-up system. Most data released in this system are high-profile economic data, or macroeconomic data,

figures that are important for financial markets as well as for journalists at business newspapers and others.

Lock-up example 1: Journalists work in a secure room where they receive the news release a specified time before the release, perhaps 30 minutes or an hour. They are not allowed to make any phone calls outside the room until release time when they can file their reports.

Lock-up example 2: The lock-up is held in a special room in which computers and telecommunications equipment owned and maintained by individual media can be left, usually under lock and key. During the lockup, journalists are allowed to use their word processors to write their articles. But communications to their employer are cut, and they cannot transmit data until a specified time.

Embargo: An embargo occurs when certain journalists get an advance copy of the report or the press release. Under clearly defined rules, journalists can read the information and write stories, but they cannot release the information until a specified time. Advance releases give the media an opportunity to prepare their story and line up interviews.

Journalists must agree to comply with the rules. If they violate the embargo by releasing the information prematurely, the ultimate sanction is to refuse access to future embargoed material. Sometimes a special location on the Internet outside the agency's firewall can allow select customers early access to embargoed news releases and data. Countries who have used the embargo attest that having the information early is no guarantee that journalists will report the story correctly.

3.4. Spokespeople

The spokesperson is an individual designated to speak with the media about a particular topic on the record. Usually the individual is named in the news release. Often the statistician is his own spokesperson, because it would be difficult for another person to become as familiar with all the data or issues. When the statistician is the spokesperson, the press office generally assists with interviews and provides training and pointers on how to deal with the media.

In some countries, managers serve as spokespersons for their programs. In others, subject-matter statisticians are required to handle matters of content, but the Director is the official spokesperson on policy-related issues.

Individuals listed as contact people in news releases absolutely must be available when the information is made public. Extra effort should be made to guarantee their availability when a release is scheduled during non-working hours like evenings and week-ends. Journalists must be able to reach these individuals directly by telephone or by e-mail. The statistical agency's image suffers if the designated spokesperson cannot be reached.

IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON INFORMATION DISSEMINATION



4.1. Who is the customer?

Expanded audience for statistical data

Prior to the Internet, most statistical offices viewed their customers as a small, elite group of experts with a high degree of interest in and knowledge of the data. With the advent of the World Wide Web, the customer base has expanded so that any citizen with a computer and a connection can access statistical resources online.

One challenge of this democratization of the data is that many new customers are not statistically literate or as familiar with the subject matter as the original customer base. This diverse range of customers has forced many statistical agencies to change their dissemination orientation to be more user-focused rather than product-focused.

The web is not enough

Before the web, statistical offices relied on the news media to be a primary disseminator of statistical data to the citizens. Now that the public can access the information directly, the role of the media in disseminating data has changed. But it is still important.

The process by which raw data are transformed into knowledge is the value-added provided through the intermediary role of the media professionals who disseminate information. Also, these journalists can point the public back to the original sources of the data in their articles.

Before the web, users had to contact statistical agencies directly for data and interpretation. Such mediated access ensured that appropriate metadata would accompany the statistics. With the web, however, self-service access allows users to browse on their own, making the need for adequate, retrievable and understandable metadata even more important. Journalists and

other customers continue to contact the statistical agencies for help interpreting the data.

4.2. What is the product?

The products are changing

Before the web, the primary method of statistical offices for providing data was through printed publications. Some agencies also provided data on tape and CD-ROM. Now the products can be electronic versions of paper documents, electronic-only documents, tables, databases, spreadsheets, and so on.

The focus is shifting from just providing numbers to providing words and text to explain the numbers, and more context and analysis of the numbers. Data are no longer enough: customers want information.

Some of the new products are, in fact, services, including web help and searchable databases. Writing specifically for the web, rather than for print documents, is becoming increasingly important in communicating with users.

Some organizations charge for their products

For many statistical offices, a goal has been cost recovery. When all data were available only in publications, or through special requests, it was far easier to know what to sell and how to set the price.

With the web, the pressure has been to provide more and more data free of charge, striking a balance between generating revenue and the public's right to information.

Some agencies provide limited access to databases to paying subscribers. They perform special tabulations or do consulting on a fee basis, or they provide special services to paying subscribers.

While news releases are generally available free, the degree that web information is available without charge to journalists varies.

Getting credit for your data

Some international organizations have investigated methods of sharing data electronically, allowing others to directly display data from statistical offices. Issues involved in data sharing include:

- Presentation of the data is out of the control of the originating office;
- Policies for attribution must be established and followed to ensure proper credit for the data, and to ensure accurate secondary sourcing;
- Provision of metadata is even more critical because the user at that point will not be on the site of the original data provider, which might have had links to metadata.

4.3. Changes within the organization as a result of the web

Changing the skill mix to support the web

Statistical agencies found they needed new skills to support disseminating information on the web. It became necessary to train existing employees or hire new employees to acquire expertise in creating and operating a website, in publishing data on the web and in creating policies and standards for web operations.

Changing the skill mix has obvious resource implications for an agency. The shift was not just technical. It was also psychological, requiring employees to be more flexible and to shift their outlook from the old way of doing business. It has often been difficult to convince data producers to change their methods and orientation.

Staff also had to understand new ways to write electronic news releases, create a press area or press room on the website, and to deal with the media's new access to all kinds of information.

Who supports the web customers?

Many thought the web would provide self-service for customers, and that telephone and e-mail support would be minimal. In fact, most offices have found that the number of inquiries has in fact increased with the availability of information on the web.

Huge increases in customers translate into many more questions and comments. It has been necessary to retrain customer service staff to answer e-mail questions or to provide help on the telephone. Press offices also had to learn new technology and dissemination methods to work with the media.

Revising data on the web

The ease and speed with which the content of websites can be revised has led to an increase in the number of revisions. A printed erratum is no longer needed to signal a change. Existing files can be updated and reloaded without the user ever knowing that a change has been made.

Some statistical offices require that all material be dated to allow for version control. Others clearly indicate that a revision has been made, and include the date of the revision, and the nature of the revision. Some agencies post their data revision policies on the web.

Statistical offices should have a policy concerning who can authorize changes, how they will be noted on the web, and what, if any, additional efforts will be made to notify customers of the change. They also should consider under what circumstances a news release should be issued to signal a revision. News pages should show revisions to ensure that the news release data match

any later revisions.

4.4. Making a good website: the user experience

What is a good website?

A good website can be defined according to whether or not the users get what they are looking for quickly and easily. The site should have:

- up-to-date content that is prepared for web consumption;
- consistent navigation designed for the content;
- a search option that defines the scope of the search;
- clear presentation of text;
- understandable links;
- little jargon or technical terms.

Finding what you want and understanding what you find

The data about the data, often called metadata, is particularly important on the web. Statistical offices need to consider two types of metadata: **discovery metadata**, which helps users find what they are looking for, and **interpretative metadata**, which helps users understand what they have found. Discovery metadata might include indexes, site maps, and lists of terms (A to Z, glossaries). Frequently, technical terms and jargon are impediments to users who are not familiar with the subject. Interpretative metadata might include links to descriptive information, footnotes, and metadata repositories as companions to online databases.

What is usability and why is it important?

How do you know if users are finding what they need on your site? Are they frustrated? Confused? The best way to find out is to actually watch users work on your site.

Feedback from users can be collected from usability tests, customer surveys, focus groups, and inhouse helpline staff. A 2001 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) survey of websites from national statistical offices and international organizations found that most were aimed at a group of professional users and were designed accordingly. Only a few had features especially designed for the casual or first-time user. Having a successful website involves designing with the user in mind.

Journalists want a special web area

Because news releases usually serve as one of the main channels for disseminating new statistical information, they must be immediately visible on the website. Some agencies highlight recent releases on their homepage.

News releases are usually found by clicking a button called “News” or “Press Releases” or “Press Room.” Releases are generally presented either by topic or by release date.

Journalists are usually under rigid deadlines, so it is helpful to provide them with electronic links from the press area or the news release to related information.

Make sure that contact information including appropriate phone numbers and e-mail addresses are easily available from every web page.

Improving access to databases

Many national statistical offices are turning to database delivery of information instead of printed publications to improve the usefulness of the information and to save money.

With the increased reliance on databases, the interfaces are critical to the success of the site. Users who are unsuccessful in using the databases often resort to contacting the agencies directly at a much greater cost.

Establishing web style standards

When web development is distributed across the organization, the result can be inconsistent presentation and unconnected navigation. The creation of web style standards assures consistent “look and feel”, and avoids problems with presentation.

Some statistical agencies are using content management systems with fixed templates for efficient work and for the purpose of establishing corporate identity. Combining the standards with a web audit helps erase the differences by identifying what authors need to change.

Can users find our site?

Statistical offices should consider strategies to ensure that people will find their site, including using keywords in the content of their web pages, encouraging links from other sites, improving marketing and paying search engines to ensure high rankings. Brochures and other handouts can be used to expand awareness of the site.

4.5. Measuring web performance and collecting customer feedback

How to evaluate web use?

Statistical offices want to know who is using their website and what is being accessed. Web logs record every transaction on the web server and are a rich source of information about activity on the

site. Hits, page views, file downloads, and user sessions all measure user traffic.

Some sites may use registration to determine customer and media information. Web trends are useful in evaluating the architectural structure but only indirectly reflect on the usefulness of the content. Web logs cannot differentiate between journalists and other users.

Customer feedback is important

Creators of websites want to know who is visiting, what they are looking for, and what problems and suggestions they have for improving the site. Some statistical offices are providing feedback forms and conducting surveys of web customers to collect this information.

These surveys are not completely scientific because they are based on a sample of convenience rather than a scientific sample. But they can provide useful insights into problems that may exist. Other offices register users to get access to statistics, although this process can drive away customers who do not want to register. Some offices are using commercial ratings and tracking programs to assess satisfaction with their websites.

Using feedback to formulate content

Most statistical offices use feedback to determine what users are interested in and what kinds of information they need. This feedback can determine the type of products that are prepared and the mode of dissemination. Some offices have created short presentations of information on topics of interest that are included on their home page.

Another new development is to use questions posed by users and answers provided by staff to create content. This dynamic application produces an FAQ (“frequently asked questions”)

section. Analyzing the types of questions that customers pose via telephone and e-mail can identify areas for improvement.

- **Media training for statisticians and officials**
- **Statistical understanding for journalists**

5.1. Introduction

If statisticians are to speak for themselves to the media and a wider public, they must learn how to communicate simply and effectively. They need to understand how the media operate, what the media agenda is and what difficulties journalists face. At the same time, it would help both statisticians and journalists if the media developed a better understanding of how statisticians work.

The media constitute the quickest and most immediate pathway for statistics to reach the general public. It makes good sense then for national and international statistical agencies to prepare strategies and programs for helping their staff deal with the media, and for the media to better understand what statisticians are trying to achieve.

This raises important questions:

- How frequent should any training be;
- How formal should it be;
- And, how far-reaching?

What are the problems? Why is there often a gulf of understanding between statisticians and journalists? Statisticians often find that dealing with the media is alien to their normal way of thinking and working.

Here are examples of areas in which statisticians often falter in dealing with the media:

- Concentrating on small details, not the big picture;
- Looking inwardly at their work, not the wider meaning;
- Putting methodology before the results, not the headline before the story;
- Using statistical terminology (jargon) rather than plain language.

This chapter examines issues surrounding media training. It looks at the various points in favour of training, and possible drawbacks. It also examines the experiences of various statistical agencies that already have training programs in place. From best practices, statistical offices can prepare their own programs to suit their needs, their budgets and their media.

5.2. Summary of main points

- The media are the quickest path to the public, so it makes sense to train both statisticians and journalists to understand each other better.
- Statistical offices need to decide what options best suit them from the various techniques available – how formal, how frequent, how far-reaching?
- Training agency staff in the ways of the media is more straightforward because it can be made a job-specific requirement. Persuading journalists to take an interest in data is far more difficult. There is a perception that most statistics are dry, hard-to-understand and, worse, of doubtful quality and reliability.

- Any media-training program must be an integral part of a statistical office's media relations strategy. Senior managers must also make a total commitment to it.
- Media training must be valued within a statistical agency. The organization must want to improve its media relations skills.
- There must be a clear picture of what media training can and cannot achieve.
- Statisticians must understand and accept that they work for the benefit of the public, not just for the interest of their peers.
- Statisticians must become more aware of the context in which they release their data, that is, what impact their data will have on other issues, news and events.
- Statisticians need to realize that journalists are more interested in results than the processes to achieve them. To journalists, impact (novelty or relevance to current issues) carries more weight than quality.
- Journalists equally need to understand that quality, accuracy and timeliness are vital to the integrity of statistical data.
- When setting up training programs, statistical offices should make sure they are active, flexible and properly evaluated.
- Who does the training? Press office staff? Invited journalists? Training agencies?

- Helping journalists understand statistics requires building their trust in an agency's honesty and integrity.
- To get journalists to invest their time in learning more about statistics, agencies need to show them 'what's in it for them'.
- Journalists should be taught the six steps for discerning probable facts from probable trash.
- Statistical offices should not rely on public education to give journalists a sufficient understanding of statistics and how to interpret them.
- Statistical offices should make maximum use of the interactive power of the web to encourage understanding and interpretation of statistics – make it fun!

5.3. Techniques and approaches – plus points and minus points

This section looks in tabular form at what may be achieved by adopting certain ideas in the training of statistical staff and also where the ideas may be lacking:

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Basic media-relations course – up to one day, mainly lecture and simple news release writing exercises to improve standard of output to the media.</p>	<p>A starting point which can be of value to staff at any level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Gives a grounding in what the media do; + Explains what is the media's agenda – how they see the world differently and write differently; + Identifies the main pitfalls in dealing with the media; + Helps give staff confidence in speaking to the media. 	<p>This is the minimum any staff member should have done before being allowed to speak directly to the media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It can only give a superficial overview of the media. - Rarely is there time to go into depth for interview techniques, radio or TV training; - Some may think this is all the training they need to do.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Advanced media-relations course</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - one or two days with interview techniques and exercises; dealing with a hostile questioner; possibly time for some radio or TV technique; talk from a journalist or a visit to a newsroom. 	<p>An important next step for staff that may need to deal more regularly with the media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Increases confidence, understanding and relationships with the media and press office; + Helps interviewees learn how to be in control of an interview; + Teaches how to avoid panic and being stampeded into ill-considered or wrong responses; + Encourages interviewees to think about and focus on a simple clear message. 	<p>Needs a lot of active input to maintain its effectiveness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Costs begin to rise as people and visits from outside the organization are employed. - Needs to be repeated regularly to maintain skills; - Needs constant commitment from senior management and human resources division.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Radio interview technique training using experienced contractors Usually a day either on-site or at a suitable training studio.</p>	<p>Gives staff the confidence to talk about their subject on air.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + The value of radio technique training is that it is a broadly transferable skill; + Good trainers will ensure statisticians understand the importance of identifying the key message and sticking to it; + Helps the statistician learn clarity, simplicity and brevity; + Helps learn the importance of 'the soundbite'; + The drive for focus serves an additional role in helping set an organization's key-messages. 	<p>Can be expensive and needs refresher courses to keep up skill level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Only a small number of people can be catered to in any one session; - Radio is often seen as a 'Cinderella' medium – not as ubiquitous or traditional as written media or as exciting as TV; - Staff may feel radio is irrelevant.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>TV interview technique training using experienced contractors usually a day either on-site or at a suitable studio.</p>	<p>Encourages further refinement of communication technique and encourages statistician to consider how to be visual in what they present.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + TV is probably the harshest of all communication environments but can feel the most rewarding in that it creates a sense of achievement; + To some people it is a lifetime goal to be interviewed on TV! + Helps underline how complex issues sometimes need to be reduced to a single short message; + Underlines how a single good graphic can be worth 1,000 words; + Shows how looking right and sounding right can boost an organization's reputation. 	<p>Can be expensive and needs refresher courses to keep up skill level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Only a small number of people can be catered to in any one session; - It is usually only required by a very few members of staff; - Some people simply can not do it – it induces extreme nervousness; - Needs care with personal appearance as well as verbal articulation.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Writing for the media course – using an experienced media writer to improve writing techniques.</p>	<p>Helps statisticians understand there is more than one way to write.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Teaches how statisticians should present their report in the best way to be interesting to the media; + Encourages simpler writing style more suitable for the public at large rather than a select band of other statisticians and academics; + Can also help internal communication and writing of papers for internal briefing. 	<p>There is a natural resistance in people to being told how to do something as fundamental as writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can seem very subjective – the credibility of the trainer is crucial; - Needs a culture change in the statistical office.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Published checklist of good practice for preparation of news releases</p>	<p>Simple written guidelines on writing for the media are vital and should be linked to basic media training.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Cheap to produce; + It provides a clear guideline of what is expected in preparing a news release as opposed to other forms of writing. 	<p>It is prescriptive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is passive and doesn't account for people's writing skills; - It needs to be coupled with further writing training before the statistician or official understands the reasoning behind the checklist.
<p>Seminars and 'brown bag lunches' – where staff involved in briefing the media have the opportunity to refresh and renew their skills.</p>	<p>Very important feedback sessions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Informal and interactive, these are relatively cheap; + They can cover a lot of people and help greatly with networking. 	<p>Need to be frequent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need strong backing from senior management to ensure they are attended and provide useful feedback. - Danger of just being a talking shop.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Exchange visits – where statisticians visit a newsroom and see how it works while a journalist comes to a statistical office.</p>	<p>Engenders an understanding in an individual of what it is like 'on the other side'.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Helps networking and personal relationships + Helps put a human face to a name or an organization. 	<p>Hard to arrange and of limited scope.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Almost certainly would need to come under a programme and perhaps sponsorship; - Needs to be for a number of days to begin to understand different working cultures; - There may be concerns about confidentiality of data when a journalist is 'loose' in a statistical office.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Tailored courses and advice – where training is given on how to deal with a specific issue or how to deal with a particular high profile release to maximize coverage. Also where thought needs to be given to a potential negative story likely to arise.</p>	<p>This is mainly of value in support of specific ‘issue-management’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Very specific to the data being put out and helps focus very clearly on the message to be given to the media. + Easy to evaluate. 	<p>A narrow view which may not be transferable to other areas of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May be outside the statistical office’s overall media-relations policy; - Not easily transferable.
<p>Workshops for journalists – where media representatives are invited in for a formal seminar and workshop on specific statistical subjects.</p>	<p>Helps journalists to understand a particular subject area.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Encourages the media to write better about statistics; + Helps the media understand the statisticians’ processes and difficulties in arriving at certain figures 	<p>Hard to interest journalists unless there is a real news story at the end of it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Statistics in general seen as too boring by journalists; - Demands on journalists’ time is great – and their attendance could not be relied upon.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Factsheets and “idiots’ guides” – written in simple, clear and concise style, these explain to journalists how they should understand and interpret statistics</p>	<p>These are free handouts for journalists.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Something a journalist can have at his or her deskside or in a pocket to help them evaluate the worth of report being put before them; + Can be provided in web, calendar, diary or poster form; + Involves very little effort from the journalists and is simple for statistical offices to produce; + They are both renewable and long-lived. 	<p>Passive and has no interaction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gains little common understanding between the journalist and the statistician. - Easily mislaid or lost by journalists in a busy newsroom.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Individual tutoring for journalists – where a statistician gives up time to go through a particular area of statistical work with a journalist and explains all the meanings and interpretations.</p>	<p>Excellent for getting a detailed picture across and easy to measure the results.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Very good for building personal relationships with the media. 	<p>Time-consuming and only covers one individual.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Of real use only to journalists who deal in special areas.
<p>Chargeable courses – where a statistical office arranges and advertises a formal course through media umbrella groups and unions to provide training on specific or general statistical subjects</p>	<p>Guaranteed audience, motivated to pay attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + If publishers put up the money they are showing long-term commitment to a better understanding of statistics; + Get the message across without having to provide a news-angle. 	<p>Requires journalists' training budget holders to recognize the value and importance of their staff being trained to understand and interpret statistics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Most media groups are very tight with their money. - Need to raise general awareness of the importance of statistics before such a course would carry much weight in the minds of journalists and their budget-holders.

Idea	Plus points	Minus points
<p>Handbooks and brochures both printed and on the web – as part of a more general education theme providing valuable background information about how to understand and interpret statistics</p>	<p>This is an extension of the free factsheets idea above.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Can be provided and used in conjunction with other communications programmes. + Uses the power and accessibility of the web. 	<p>Passive and requires the user to find it and try to understand it.</p>
<p>Interactive web pages – where journalists and the public are encouraged “to have fun with statistics” and try out various statistical methods.</p>	<p>Fun to do and uses the interactive power of the web. Learning through games.</p>	<p>Passive and possibly vulnerable to the accusation of trivialization.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs careful planning. - Open only to those with access to the web. - Not yet been tried by a statistical office.

HANDLING MEDIA CRISES



There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full
- Henry Kissinger

Despite all of our best efforts, things are going to happen that place a statistical office or data collection activity in an awkward or embarrassing position. Whether it is a significant revision to a released figure, bodily harm to a worker, or computer hackers violating a web site, we must be prepared to react and quickly take control of the event to minimize damage to the agency. Preparation is the key to handling crisis communications. This chapter will walk you through handling a crisis and provide tips on how your agency might become better prepared for such cases. It provides tools and guidance to properly inform the media and public during an emergency. By taking an open and honest, proactive approach you should be able to:

- Help protect your employees and your agency;
- “Speak with one voice” and coordinate with appropriate offices;
- Prepare spokespersons to give consistent, accurate responses;
- Control rumors or misstatements by the public, media or your own employees.

6.1. What is a crisis?

A major (negative) incident in a statistical office becomes a media crises when the media gets involved. To pre-empt negative reactions, it is often advisable to contact media (e.g. issue a statement) before the news gets out and develops into a media crises.

The Chinese term for crisis is comprised of two elements: danger and opportunity. In any crisis event, there is apprehension, fear, and the possibility of permanent damage. There also is an opportunity for a positive outcome.

A crisis by its very nature is temporary. There may be after effects - which include how we handle the crisis - but the actual crisis is usually short term. The key to addressing a crisis is to recognize the need to bring to bear the best possible talent and solutions in the shortest period of time.

6.2. Being ready for a possible crisis

- Plan Ahead – Determine who and how to respond. Create a “Crisis Response Team” and make sure the members receive crisis communications training. Members should include the head of the agency, head of public affairs/media relations, and others who play a critical role in the running of the agency and may be needed. Don’t wait for an incident before you decide who should be involved on the crisis response team but do keep the number of members manageable. You may even want to identify a location(s) that can be used by the crisis response team should an emergency arise. The location should provide privacy and necessary tools to take action.
- Develop a crisis communications manual that includes steps to be taken, important phone numbers (also include numbers for emergency services as well as key media), standby statements, etc.
- Identify Vulnerabilities – There are five types of crises:
 - Facilities – damage caused, for example by an explosion, fire leakage or natural disaster.
 - Community – adverse condition created by outside individuals/organizations hostile to the agency or its mission (e.g. computer hackers).
 - Employee – includes loss of life, bodily harm, sabotage or issues surrounding working conditions.
 - Consumer – includes significant and frequent data revisions, allegations against your agency or things that

make respondents less likely to participate in surveys/censuses.

- Image – includes unlawful or ill-perceived activities, such as sexual misconduct, drug use, financial infringement, or the indictment or arrest of a senior agency official. This is the most difficult to counteract.

Make an assessment of those things that could go wrong during the normal course of business. Don't overlook things that could affect your reputation as well as technological breaches.

- Prepare Standby Statements – These are concise, “fill-in-the-blanks” statements that can help with crafting the first response/statement given to the media. They should reflect your identified vulnerabilities. The statistical offices' vulnerabilities in different countries can be different, so focus on the situations that might be applicable to your office. A list of possible standby statements to develop is:
 - 1) Accident involving an employee,
 - 2) Employee injury or attack,
 - 3) Disgruntled employee disturbance,
 - 4) Falsification/loss of confidential data,
 - 5) Unauthorized computer access to web site,
 - 6) Employee accused of criminal activity on the job,
 - 7) Employee accused of criminal activity off the job,
 - 8) Public denunciation,
 - 9) Protest or demonstration,
 - 10) Accusation of involvement in law-enforcement raid (where the public might feel that census or other data identified the location of those raided),
 - 11) Natural disaster,
 - 12) Bomb threat,
 - 13) Confrontation with resident,
 - 14) Robbery,
 - 15) Telephone system overload (for data collection or

- fulfillment activities using telephone),
- 16) Employee payroll (problems with paying staff on time and/or the correct amount),
 - 17) Accident involving an agency vehicle,
 - 18) Enumerator impersonation.

Sample Standby Statement

Natural Disaster

At **(X:00 PM/AM/date)** a **(fire, earthquake or other disaster)** occurred at the **(location of office)** resulting in **(any physical injuries to personnel)** and damage to **(equipment, data, etc.)**

(XX) agency personnel **(were injured//or//no injuries were reported)**. The injured staff members were given first aid at the scene and transported to area hospitals for further observation and treatment. A senior manager from the **(X office/ X agency)** accompanied the injured to the hospital, and we are awaiting more information from him/her.

The **(disaster)** **(did or did not)** damage **(X)** agency data being collected for the **(name of survey/ census)**. We have a number of controls in place to ensure the security and safety of all information. **(State or summarize policies or security practices.)**

We will provide additional information about the injured and the extent of the damage when it becomes available.

We will meet with you at **(X:00 PM/AM/date)** at this location to keep you apprised of the situation.

Note: in the event that an employee is involved in a fatal incident or accident, family members or next of kin should first be contacted before any statement is released to the media. The highest-level staff person of the agency who can quickly arrive at the location of the family or next of kin should

make this contact.

When releasing information to the media, you should stick to the facts included in the standby statement. If you feel you must say something, never respond with “No comment.” Instead, say: “The situation is still being assessed. We’ll have a statement for you as soon as we have all the facts.”

Once the standby statement has been released, the Crisis Response Team should meet to conduct a situation analysis, focusing on:

1. Analyzing media response to the standby statement
 2. Assembling a list of all resulting media questions
 3. Developing responses for all media questions
 4. Conducting any necessary research
 5. Continuing to identify any potential issues that could become problems.
 6. Assessing lessons learned to improve future performance or prevent recurrence.
- Practice – Conduct crisis communications training for those likely to serve as spokespeople in the event of an emergency and those who may be involved with determining what to do and handling the media. If possible, simulate some of the situations with which your agency may be confronted.
 - Distribute Procedures to Staff – Draft written procedures or a manual that is given to appropriate staff. Staff should keep a copy at home as well as on their laptops or handheld mobile computing devices to refer to while traveling.
 - Be sure to include in your communications plan how you will keep your employees informed.

6.3. What to do when crisis occurs

- **First Actions** – Get the facts. Try to determine, as best you can, what actually happened. Answer these questions:
 - Who is involved?
 - Are there any injuries?
 - Is there physical danger to anyone?
 - Where and when did the event occur?
 - Do any emergency personnel (police, fire and ambulance) need to be called?

- **Follow-through** – There are two goals of this stage.
 - 1) To respond appropriately with actions or statements that will take the event out of the “emergency” phase and get accurate information to the media and the public.
 - 2) To gain some measure of “control” of how the event is regarded by the media and the public, continuing to provide accurate information and having the situation under control.

- **Monitoring** – Is the event over? Has media or public interest in the event subsided? Does more need to be done?

- **Follow-up** when the crisis is over:
 - 1) Evaluate how the crisis was handled. Did the Crisis Response Team work efficiently? Should something be changed in crisis communications in future?
 - 2) Determine what triggered the crisis and what should be done to avoid the same kind of crisis in future.

Remember, the public’s immediate assessment of an agency in crisis is based on these four factors of earning trust and credibility:

- Empathy and/or caring (usually assessed within the first 30 seconds);
- Competence, expertise and readiness;

- Honesty and openness;
- Dedication and commitment.

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