
Media and statistics in the age of interactivity

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Ten years ago, with the first statistical websites, many of us thought that:

- The users would have found the statistical information they needed from the Nsos (National statistical offices) on the Net.
- The role of the media in the dissemination of official statistics was going to be less important.

We called this process disintermediation...

... but everything went in a different way

The web today: too many data!!!

- Nsos have improved their websites, but cannot cope with the increase of statistical information (often of low quality) on the Net.
- Search engines have flattened the users' perception: Google puts all the information at the same level. Few users check the metadata.
- The Web 2.0 magnifies the problem: blogs and social networks use indifferently good and bad data. People trust the friends who publish it, and do not enquire about the source.

Meanwhile the media have changed...

- Newspapers are losing copies, because of the competition of television and Internet
- In many cases (in Italy, for example) the reaction of the newspapers targeted to the general public is to compete with television's "infotainment": the data become just an occasion for putting opinions one against the other.

... This means that statistical communication through the media is still very important, but it is not enough to correct the circulation of bad data in the era of Internet.

... we can say that the media today are not the solution, but part of the problem

- The media give space to curious data, even if not produced with good methodologies.
- The media give importance to criticisms to the Nsos by any other source, because this is part of the dramatisation of information.

The result is that the Nsos feel the “unfair competition” by the producers of bad statistics. In any case, why spend a lot in big surveys when with little money and good communication you get the same attention from the media?

Politicians distort data... and people cannot distinguish right from false figures

- ❑ In Italy, for example, data about the changeover from lira to euro, unemployment, poverty, dimension of the “hidden economy” in the Gdp, are often distorted for political reasons.
- ❑ Apparently the efforts to improve the knowledge of data did not give results, even in these times of crisis. People in Europe feel that data are important, but do not remember them, probably because they feel that macrodata are not so pertinent to their own life.
- ❑ The result of this situation is that for public opinion it is difficult to distinguish correct data from false ones.

The importance of communication: the value of statistics depends on the users

- According to Giovannini (Oecd), the “added value” of official statistics depends on:
 - Dimensions of the audience (how many people know the data)
 - Quantity of data that are really relevant to each person for taking decisions
- *Then statistics have no value without communication.*
Possible actions:
 - Promotion of statistical culture
 - Interaction with media and “new media”
 - Obtain opinion leaders' support
 - Good use of the new technologies

Statistical culture: how to be “know-ledge builders”? – Oecd

- **suggests:** Disseminate material with new softwares like gapminder.org
- Find new ways to present the data: videoclips etc.
- Produce international comparisons; so you will target the “global audience”
- Invest on disaggregated info in order to tailor the data to everybody’ personal situation
- Increase relations with social groups and analyses on the correct use of the data

Keep a strict control on the use of data by the media (and by politicians)

- Watch for the crucial moment: the first “takes” by news agencies a few minutes after the data release.
- Keep an intense interaction with the journalists who utilize statistics
- Don't forget the new media: blogs can be very dangerous in disseminating false information
- Don't be afraid to correct the media, but also the actors of the political theatre on television, when they make a wrong use of the data.

But the National statistical offices cannot be left alone...

- Promoting statistical culture and monitoring media and “new media” would require additional resources, in times of fund reductions
- To transform information into knowledge we need a big support by statisticians and economists from the academical world
- Something might be done even in high schools, with more courses on statistics, that in everyday’s life for most people will be more important than calculus (see Arthur Benjamin’s “Ted talk”)

New technologies can help. Examples:

- ❑ In the Usa, the website **stats.org** by the George Mason University has been created with the mission “to examine how numbers are distorted and statistics are misunderstood in the media and in society” and is often quoted for its positions correcting media and televisions
- ❑ Web 2.0 can be used in a positive way. Through websites like swivel.com , people download, exchange and make comments, producing thousands of data sets and graphs
- ❑ There is a growing use of statistics in wiki technologies in order to promote debate and create “bottom up” consensus. (See *Newsweek*, “Power in numbers” on the use of Wiki technologies in the Un.)

In conclusion:

- Communicating official statistics is today more difficult than in the past
- The evolution of the media flattens the perception of important figures
- The defence of quality should mobilize of the world of “numerical culture”
- New technologies, when correctly used, can “give a hand”.
- And remember that...

Information is not knowledge (Albert Einstein)