

Providing facts where opinions are formed



The role of official statistics in an evolving communication society

Conference organised under the auspices of the OECD Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy, OECD Conference Centre, Paris 5-6 October 2017

1. Background

With the rapid technological progress in recent years the way of communicating and retrieving information from different sources has changed dramatically in our society. In particular, the younger generation does not seem to rely on traditional media like newspapers, radio or TV as their main source of information. In many cases, social media have replaced traditional media as the principal source of information. Opinions of an increasing part of our society are, hence, formed in completely different ways than they used to be only a few years ago. Opinions determine our societies and institutions in our democratic states.

The advantage of social media, as often praised by provider platforms, as compared to traditional media is that there is no intermediary between the producer of information and its recipient. Communication takes place in a much more direct, immediate and interactive way. People communicate within self-defined circles of friends, families and think-a-likes.

While this is certainly an advantage as far as private conversations are concerned, there may be a risk that differentiating between factual information and the reproduction of somebody else's non-factual opinion becomes very difficult in such a setup. It can be observed that more and more frequently untrue statements are spread through social media with the aim to influence or even manipulate opinions. Policy makers as well as social media platforms are becoming more and more alert about the effects such manipulation of opinions through untrue facts can have on our democracies.

In addition, social media is not subject to the same code of ethics that we have come to expect with traditional media sources whereby journalists are meant to verify multiple sources before publishing information.



2. The role of official statistics

The main function and objective of Official Statistics is to provide statistical information to society in order to enable people and decision makers form their opinions based on verifiable facts and to take informed decisions. National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and international organisations with official statistical activities (IOS) have advanced a lot in recent years to make statistical information more accessible to the general public. Nevertheless, even if providers of Official Statistics have started to be active on social media, for the most part, their main communication channels continue to rely on providing statistical information on their websites or through traditional media. Even if efforts have been made to use modern advanced visualisation tools and good contextual information there is a risk that this information goes unnoticed by an increasing part of the society, in particular the younger generation.

If it is the ambition of Official Statistics to continue to play its role and contribute to an informed society without leaving anyone behind, NSOs and IOS have to provide statistical information in the form and on platforms which people use as their source of information. This is non-trivial in many ways.

First, the language used on social media differs from the scientific and sometimes technical language used when publishing statistical information. Statistics producers must square the circle of providing accurate information while using “colloquial” language. Additionally, the right choice of form and content of communication might vary from one social media platform to another (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.). Second, spreading statistical information to rather closed circles on social media is not self-evident, as these circles need to be identified and strategies to penetrate them have to be developed, which might take time. Third, the use of social media platforms by young people is anything but static – by the time NSOs and IOS might get acquainted with one platform, a majority of users might already have switched to a new platform.

New technical and communication skills are required in order to address the challenges ahead. NSOs and IOS might need to establish new partnership with producers of communication like filmmakers (YouTube) or news outlets. Partnerships might also extend to supporting institutions specialised in identifying and correcting false news on social media. One big challenge for NSOs and IOS will be to find ways to become more relevant and present in citizens’ ordinary lives – this relates both to the content of the statistical information provided, as well as to its form of distribution.

If the aim is to make Official Statistics more accessible to the younger generation, NSOs and IOS might look beyond their presence on social media and engage with schools and the education system, in order to become a well-known reference point for important facts.



3. The conference

Official Statistics should be perceived as an anchor of serious and factual information. Opinions should be formed on the basis of facts and figures and not emerge from deliberate and biased information. If Official Statistics are to remain relevant, they must be present on social media to provide the factual statistical information needed.

The first day of the conference will be open to participants from NSOs, IOS, media, communications, youth, government officials, etc.

Participation in the second day will be limited to Director-Generals, Chief Statisticians and Communication Officers from NSOs and IOS.

Objective

This conference will address the challenges of remaining relevant in a rapidly-evolving world and help NSOs and IOS develop new communication strategies.

Participants

- Directors General of NSOs/Chief Statisticians of IOS
- Ambassadors to the OECD
- Communication experts from NSOs/IOS

Speakers

- Behavioural scientists with expertise on opinion formation of different parts of the society
- Traditional and social media communication experts
- Academics
- Policy experts
- Users of social media (e.g. young people, students)
- Communication experts from NSOs/IOS

Time and venue

5-6 October 2017 at the OECD Conference Centre in Paris