

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

Key takeaways

With the rapid technological progress in recent years, the way of communicating and retrieving information has changed dramatically in our society. On 5-6 October 2017, representatives from National Statistics Offices (NSOs), International Organisations with official statistical activities (IOSs), communications experts, journalists, academics, policy experts and students gathered to discuss the role of official statistics in an evolving communication society. The purpose of the conference was to address the challenges of remaining relevant in a rapidly-evolving world and help NSOs and IOSs develop new communication strategies.

Thursday 5 October 2017

People and social media: Gaining insights for NSOs and IOSs

Welcome

Martine Durand, OECD Chief Statistician and Director of Statistics; and Konrad Pesendorfer, Chair of the Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy, Director General of Statistics Austria

Ms. Durand opened the conference by focusing on how official statistics can be delivered to younger generations. Official statistics can provide people with reliable data to form opinions; however, the way in which young people are accessing information today is changing at a rapid pace, with social media being one of the main sources of news. It is therefore imperative to ensure that the information being shared on social media is factual, accurate and unbiased. Official statistics are essential in making this happen. M. Pesendorfer expanded on these points highlighting that we are tasked to contribute to better lives through better communication and that having people from outside of the statistical community to help statisticians think about these issues is critical.

Paris, October 2017

Opening remarks

Gabriela Ramos, Special Counsellor to the Secretary-General and Sherpa to the G20

Ms. Ramos intervention highlighted the importance of developing evidence-based policies. However, good statistical indicators and good policies is only the beginning of influencing people's outcomes. As Ms. Ramos expressed, people are not always rational beings; they have feelings and emotions. We therefore need to engage in a different kind of discussion in our communities in order to combat this new era of disinformation.

To address this, the OECD launched the New Approaches to Economic Challenges (NAEC) initiative which aims to better understand where people come from, and communicate findings that speak to people.

Ms. Ramos emphasised that our facts represent only part of the world view, and that we need to ensure we are representing the whole reality and avoid the creation of a fractured society. She concluded by stressing the importance of bringing other fields together (sociology, history, etc.) to better understand the complexity of our world and the way forward.

Setting the scene: How are opinions formed in the 21st century?

Rahaf Harfoush, Communications Strategist and Digital Anthropologist

Ms. Harfoush set the scene by exploring how opinions are formed in the 21st century. She began by addressing the assumption that there is a distance between people and tools, explaining that the digital revolution is closing the gap between man and machine. She went on to explain that we are entering an era of unprecedented technological intimacy.

Ms. Harfoush delved into the four hidden forces that are shaping people's opinions. First, the world is now abundant with data, creating an evolution in our relationship with information. While people were once taught to think in a limited and fixed end term, the world is now unlimited and open ended in information, which impacts people's cognitive abilities and attention spans. To combat this rapid change in information sharing, Ms. Harfoush suggested that people seek to cultivate a mind-set of information zen, understanding that it is no longer possible to know everything. Second, Ms. Harfoush explained that digitalisation has created a new reality and culture where personalised content has affected objectivity. With everyone able to publish online, opinions are morphing into beliefs. Third, she described the newfound 'digital DNA', where people are embedding their values into technological code. Modern technology is now the manifestation of people's belief systems. Finally, Ms. Harfoush spoke about the information economy itself. As she explained, the post-truth world is run like a business, where it is facilitating shifts of behaviour amongst people.

Ms. Harfoush concluded by asking participants to reflect on what their information philosophy is, and whether they are taking advantage of this new digital culture.

Session 1: Who is our audience and how are they getting their facts?

Moderator: *Julian Knott, Counsellor to the Director of Public Affairs and Communications, OECD Public Affairs and Communications*

Panellists: *George Brock, Former Professor of Journalism at City University London; Richard Addy, Director of Addy-Kassova Audience Strategy; Sahir Khan, Executive Vice-President of the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD) at the University of Ottawa; Prateek Sibal, Master's Student, Economics & Public Policy, Sciences Po, Paris; Anthony Gooch, OECD Director of Public Affairs and Communications*

The first session focused on the audiences NSOs and IOSs are trying to reach, how best to disseminate information to these audiences, current media habits, and media driven norms and narratives. Panellists focused on the supply and demand of information. Specifically, they suggested that NSOs and IOSs should look at the demand for facts, and not just supply them blindly. While social media is the main source of news for 18-24 year olds, it was highlighted that TV news is still the main source of news across all age groups amongst OECD countries. NSOs and IOSs must therefore disseminate their data accordingly. The panel also touched on the fact that NSOs and IOSs have become comfortable with disseminating information to an already-informed public. However, organisations should remain aware that not all of the public is informed about issues being communicated on. NSOs and IOSs need to make 'data cool', by making it relatable.

Key points:

- Organisations should experiment, learn and adapt to the conversations that are already happening online, and join them accordingly;
- Organisations should appeal as much to the heart as to the mind, as the emotional story is far more compelling to audiences;
- Organisations should work with partners to amplify their message;
- Branding is important: organisations should ensure their brand is known;
- Organisations should not be afraid to hire new skills to think outside of the box; and
- NSOs and IOSs should try to make 'data cool' and change their narrative.

Session 2: Differentiating between fact and fiction: How is "alternative evidence" created and propagated?

Moderator: *Stephen Di Biasio, Deputy Head of Public Affairs and Media, OECD Public Affairs and Communications*

Panellists: *Paul Resnick, Michael D. Cohen Collegiate Professor of Information and Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Affairs at the University of Michigan School of Information; David Dieudonné, France Lead for Google News Lab; Dulce Ramos, Program Manager of the International Fact-Checking Network*

The goal of the second session was to highlight how 'alternative evidence' is created and propagated, by bringing together panellists from fact-checking organisations, search engines and academia. The panellists discussed the danger of misinformation, and the responsibilities that NSOs and IOSs have to protect their brand as the trusted source of facts. Both Google News Lab and the International Fact-Checking Network shared their various successes in

debunking fake news stories and showed the legitimacy in verifying information. However, debunking incorrect stories is a difficult task, since corrections of false news may reach different people than the original posts. The panellists agreed that partnerships are key in combatting fake news and ensuring correct information reaches the right audiences.

Key points:

- Partnerships with fact-checkers, social media platforms, and journalists are key;
- Videos are very impactful for debunking fake news;
- Organisations should make it easy for people to link to the facts on their official websites;
- Rumours and corrections may reach different audiences; and
- Since corrections of rumours can backfire, organisations should position themselves as the trusted source of information, and ensure that fact-checkers have all the information they need.

Session 3: Building stronger social media communities and reaching out to those who matter

Moderator: *Alison Benney, Social Media Manager, OECD Public Affairs and Communications*

Panellists: *Elizabeth Knights-Ward, Content and Social Marketing Manager at Hootsuite; Mariana Kotzeva, acting Director General of Eurostat; Dirk van Damme, Head of Innovation and Measuring Progress Division at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills; Mike Ackermans, Chief Editor and Director of Statistics Netherlands Communication and News*

The third session of the conference focused on the role of social media communities in helping NSOs and IOSs reach out to those who matter. The panel expanded on the different uses of the most popular social media platforms, and emphasised the importance of listening and engaging with social media communities. The panel also pointed to the need to consider social media strategies as part of an organisation's wider communications plan in order to amplify the impact of the data being disseminated. The panel emphasised that the success of social media today is that it empowers users and communities that would otherwise be impossible to connect with. As such, NSOs and IOSs must leverage this incredible opportunity. Through targeted outreach on various channels, and by tracking the performance of that outreach with metrics, organisations have the possibility to bolster their strategies and reach a wider audience.

Key points:

- NSOs and IOSs should integrate their social media strategies within their overall communications plans;
- Different social media channels fit different audiences and different purposes;
- Organisations should adapt their content to the different platforms;
- Building a successful community is done through listening, adding value, engaging and sharing insights;
- There is a need for sharing experiences amongst NSOs and IOSs; and
- Training select statisticians to act as spokespeople can be a good strategy.

Session 4: Humanising data to tell stories that speak to social media users

Moderator: *Carol Guthrie, Head of Public Affairs and Media, OECD Public Affairs and Communications*

Panellists: *Christine Jeavans, Data Journalist at BBC News Visual Journalism; Claire O’Riordan, Head of the Plain English Editing and Training Service of the National Adult Literacy Agency; Lauren Bradford, Social Media Manager for the UK Office for National Statistics; Patrick Love, Advisor to the Office of the OECD Secretary-General*

This session narrowed in on humanising data in order to tell a relatable and digestible story to audiences. According to the panellists, if Organisations can prompt an emotional response from people, the message is more likely to be retained. Since people like finding out about other people and themselves, using real-life examples, exposing the human element will interest users. In fact, the panel explained that the statistics being presented do not necessarily need to be exciting, if they talk to the people, there will be interest. The panel also stressed that providing content that is easy to grasp, in plain language with a visual that has been well thought out will help NSOs and IOSs reach larger audiences.

Key points:

- Exposing the human element within a dataset allows people to see where they fit into the picture;
- Organisations should provide succinct quality content that people can easily grasp;
- Audiences should be able to understand the content after a single reading;
- NSOs and IOSs should strive to provide a narrative;
- Educating writers and training them to write in plain language is useful; and
- There is a need to be bilingual, speaking both the technical and non-technical language.

Friday 6 October 2017

**Strengthening NSOs and IOSs social media strategies going forward
[NSOs and IOSs only]**

Session 5: What social media strategies for NSOs and IOSs (two breakout groups in parallel)

Breakout Group 1: Partnering for success

Moderator: *Richard Addy, Director of Addy-Kassova Audience Strategy*

The first breakout session discussed how best to approach partnerships with other organisations. The group explored both a short term and a long term solution. The short term solution focused on trust and diversity. The group discussed how to address people that are disenfranchised from regular media. They agreed that while the media community may be, at times, misinforming the public, they should continue to be an important partner for NSOs and IOSs. The long-term solution focused on literacy and understanding. The group agreed that in order to reach the right people, NSOs and IOSs may want to target schools (including those that write school curriculums), teachers, parents and families, sports groups and the gaming industry.

Key points:

- In order to create sustainable partnerships, NSOs and IOSs should follow several steps in planning these, including: clarifying the issue, identifying the audience, exploring partnership and format opportunities, deciding on the appropriate channels and tone of the messages;
- The more contextual outreach efforts are, the likelier they are to create lasting partnerships; and
- While NSOs and IOSs may want to focus only on partnering with one or two organisations, it may be beneficial to create an exhaustive list of potential partnerships and then determine what can be done with each partner.

Session 5: What social media strategies for NSOs and IOSs (two breakout groups in parallel)

Breakout Group 2: Building communities and delivering the right information

Moderator: *Elizabeth Knights-Ward, Content and Social Marketing Manager at Hootsuite*

The second breakout group discussed the importance of building social media communities in order to deliver factual information. Participants agreed that situations differ between countries, with small statistical offices having fewer resources. Participants provided feedback as to their organisation's particular successes and failures. The group mentioned the need to establish a better understanding in NSOs and IOSs between the statisticians/experts and the

communication experts that serve them. In terms of strategy, participants focused on how to re-shape the story so people can learn to trust NSOs as the main source of official data and news. They agreed that they must commit to taking a risk, getting into the social media community, and creating a unique personality online, in order to stand out.

Key points:

- Listening to the social media community is key, NSOs and IOSs should not be afraid to interact with followers and ask them questions;
- Building trust within communities is a challenge; organisations should be creative in how they put out information to build a positive reputation;
- NSOs and IOSs need to come together to decide what their role on social media should be and to develop best practices on how to reshape the story to be seen as the trusted source of data (partnering with journalist and education ministries); and
- In order to identify what communities NSOs and IOSs are failing to reach, they could start by identifying who they are trying to reach, and where and how these target audiences are consuming information.

Closing session: Next steps

Konrad Pesendorfer, Chair of the Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy and Director General of Statistics Austria; and Martine Durand, OECD Chief Statistician and Director of Statistics

Ms. Durand summarised the key findings from each of the first day's sessions (see above) and M. Pesendorfer's provided some of the key takeaways from the conference and next steps.

Key takeaways:

- NSOs and IOSs are in a powerful position to communicate as they are disseminating high quality and relevant statistical data that can have an impact on society;
- NSOs and IOSs need to convey complex issues in simple ways online all while remaining rigorous and ensuring that data are not over-simplified;
- Social media is only one part of organisations' overall communications strategies, audiences not on social media should not be neglected, a good balance needs to be found;
- There is no single approach, if NSOs and IOSs are to resonate with their audience, they need to know who these are;
- NSOs and IOSs should devote more time to discovering what it takes to be successful online, to change their social media culture, and to become more outspoken within their principles in mind; and
- It is useful to bring the statistical community together with the non-statistical community to have these discussions.

Next steps:

- The Conference of European Statistics will continue to look at these issues at a seminar being organised on strategic communications and communications in a crisis situation in June 2018; and
- The Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy Bureau will discuss how to complement these discussions and see how NSOs and IOSs can continue to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Closing remarks

Mari Kiviniemi, OECD Deputy Secretary-General

Ms. Kiviniemi's closing remarks touched on several issues discussed throughout the conference. The OECD Deputy Secretary-General expressed how data is growing at a rapid pace worldwide. The speed, volume and reach of today's digital information flows are creating conditions for misinformation, fake news and false 'evidence' to thrive. She affirmed that the OECD intends to continue to tackle this problem through its NAEC initiative, specifically through the organisation of a workshop in November 2017 that will seek to underpin the functioning of social media and assess social media's positive and negative influence on the judgements, decisions and actions of citizens, companies, policymakers, and civil society. Beyond this event, the OECD is developing new statistics and new tools to better understand how economies work today. Ms. Kiviniemi concluded by encouraging information sharing and the exchange of best practices among NSOs and IOSs.