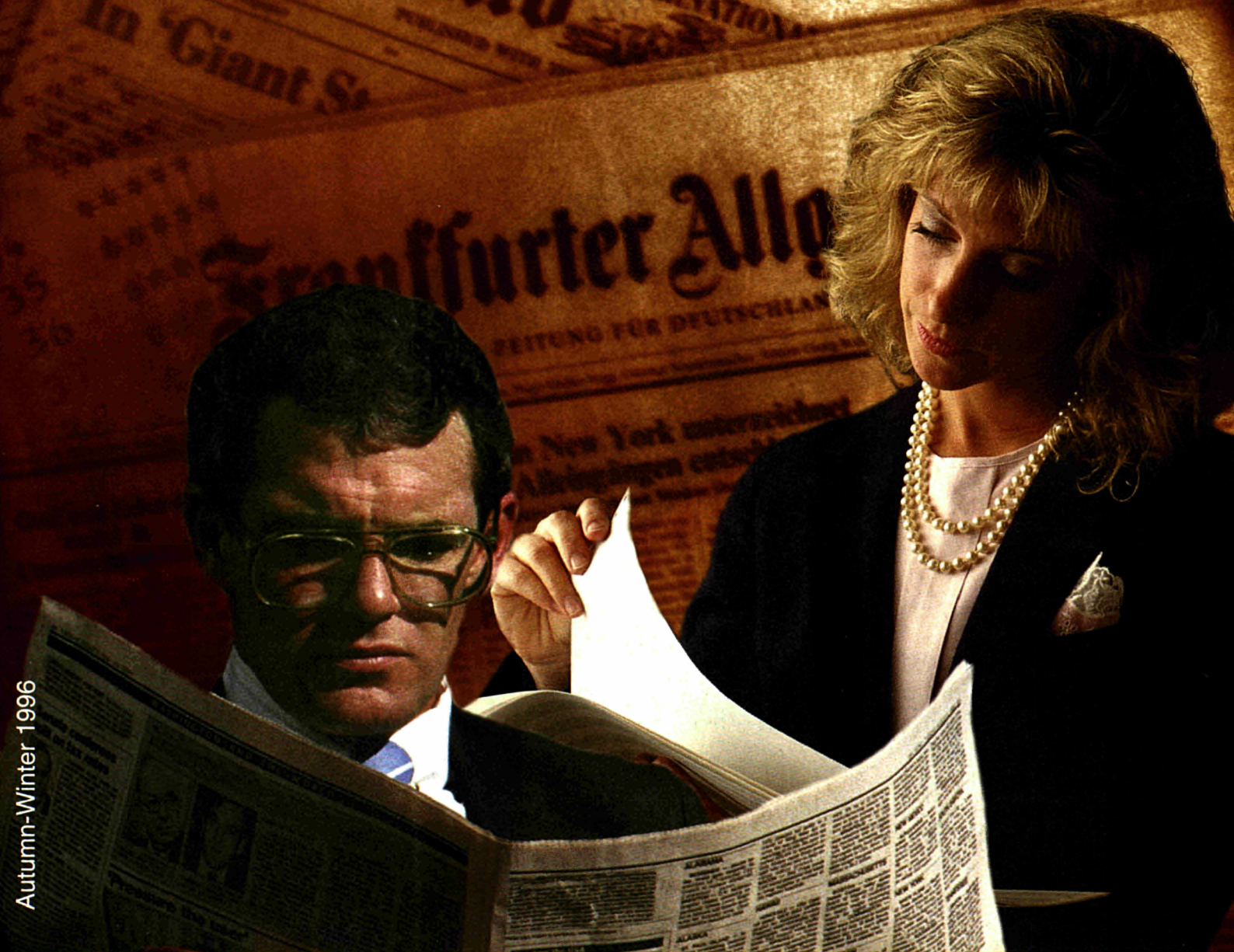




Statistics in the News



Autumn-Winter 1996

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

EUROSTAT AIMS TO REDUCE STATISTICAL BURDEN ON BUSINESSES

Eurostat is launching an initiative to try to reduce the burden of businesses having to provide data for official statistics.

To this end it is holding a two-day international seminar in Luxembourg on 15 and 16 January next year on use of administrative sources for statistical purposes. Aim is to promote the use of administrative sources both for business and social statistics.

This is all part of Eurostat's target of a high-quality and improved European statistical system. Eurostat believes the use of administrative sources rather than special surveys, the coordination of those surveys that are necessary and the systematic use of information technology will provide statistics that are more detailed, up-to-date and relevant while, at the same time, easing the burden on respondents.

First day of the seminar will be dedicated to a discussion of the benefits of using administrative sources. The second day, more technical, will give certain national statistical offices the opportunity to present their experience in detail. It is hoped further possibilities for the development of the use of administrative sources for statistics will emerge from the seminar.

Eurostat hopes the seminar will be well attended by representatives of national statistical offices, public administrations and the business community from all over the EU. Participation is free of charge. Those wishing to attend should contact:

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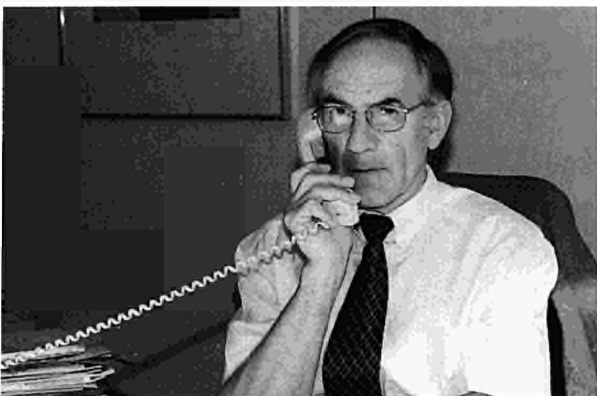
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Statistics and news media

O pportunities and challenges



Fons Theis

The day-to-day work of governments, firms, markets and stock exchanges and public opinion are governed by statistics. From gross domestic product to unemployment, from inflation to agricultural output, from energy consumption to levels of education, statistics are a vital aid for governing and making decisions and for assessing and appraising economic and social trends, the state of a nation or of an international organisation such as the European Union, and the activities of governments and institutions. Statistics are an integral part of a democratic society, which by definition needs to be transparent. The importance of statistics will continue to grow in the future, especially as the coming information society is bound to dictate its own rules.

It is therefore no surprise that statistics are cropping up more and more in the information disseminated across the whole range of news media: newspapers, magazines, radio and television.

This provides an opportunity for national and international statistical offices, which are having to cope with growing demand. But it is also a chal-

lenge. The challenge is in measuring the past for a better understanding of the present, or even the future. The challenge is in getting a grip on circumstances that are changing faster and faster in an increasingly complex world. The challenge is in constantly maintaining the credibility of statistics through the quality of the product, the impartiality of reporting and total independence from outside political interference.

Every government is only too aware of the power of statistics. There is always an underlying temptation to influence how they are presented for the sake of short-term political gain. The best way of safeguarding statistical independence is by making as many people as possible aware of statistics. The news media play a vital role in this: they are the ideal channel for transmitting information and have the means of reaching every segment of the population. Ultimately, it is the media that are the safest guarantors of the independence of statistical institutes. The fact is that once the rules for the dissemination of statistical information are properly laid down - either by legal and administrative provisions or by practice - the media will be the first to react if any of these rules are infringed.

In democratic countries the rules generally follow the same basic principles. They are the main theme of this edition of *Sigma* devoted to the relations between statistics and the media. The International Monetary Fund, for example, gives the following guidance on this topic:

■ *Coverage, periodicity and timeliness:* Comprehensive economic and financial data, disseminated on a timely basis, are essential to the transparency of macro-economic performance and policy.

■ *Access to the public:* Dissemination of official statistics is an essential feature of statistics as a public good. Ready and equal access are principal requirements for the public, including market participants. Issuing a release calendar represents an important element of "best practice" in highlighting sound management and transparency of statistical compilation. The data should be released to all interested parties at the same time and under the same conditions.

■ *Integrity:* To fulfill the purpose of providing the public with information, official statistics must have the confidence of their users. In turn, confidence in the statistics ultimately becomes a matter of confidence in the objectivity and professionalism of the agency producing the statistics. Transparency of its practices and procedures is a key factor in creating this confidence. It is recommended to disseminate the terms and conditions under which official statistics are produced, including those relating to the confidentiality of individually identifiable information. If governments are informed in advance, such practices should be totally transparent. Ministerial commentary, if any, should be clearly identified, so that its sources will be known by the public. Changes in methodology should be noted in advance.

■ *Quality:* A set of standards that deals with the coverage, periodicity and timeliness of data must also address the quality of statistics. Although quality is difficult to judge, proxies that can be monitored, designed to focus on information the user needs to judge quality, can be useful. Dissemination includes the provision of access to information about methodology and sources on request and to data supporting statistical cross-checks and verification of reasonableness.

It is up to everyone to play the particular part assigned to him or her, in accordance with professional practice. Statistics and the news media should work together in serving democracy and society.

Fons Theis
Press Officer, Eurostat

JOHN WRIGHT worked in news media relations for the UK Central Statistical Office for a total of seven years. From 1989-92 he was the man in charge. Then from 1992 to 1995 he was seconded to Eurostat to establish a press service and raise the international profile of the organisation. Since leaving Eurostat - and the UK Civil Service - last November he has established himself as an international news media consultant. One assignment was to write a book on news media relations for the statistical offices of countries in Central and Eastern Europe in transition to a market economy - designed essentially as a practical guide or manual (see Page 10). This obliged him to focus his thoughts on this key subject, go back to fundamentals and put his experience into a simple framework. In this article he describes some of the conclusions he reached, and also Eurostat's philosophy towards the media...

S

tatistics in the news

In writing the book *Statistics in the news*, naturally I had to decide on a starting point and it was this: *Releasing official statistics to the news media - why is it so important to get it right?*

The answers to this question provided the agenda for the publication and obliged me to dig to the roots of an area in which I have been involved for a good part of my working life. It is a subject of critical importance to the proper function of a statistical system in a democracy, but one that is, perhaps, not always treated as seriously as it deserves - not given as much weight as other parts of the statistical operation.

My basic conclusions went something like this:

- Official statistics record matters of great significance for both nations and individuals.

- They are one way in which the ordinary citizen can judge the state of the nation and how well (or badly) his or her Government is running things

- and they can be a very good way - because, on the whole, they tend to measure things warts and all, free of the "spin" that inevitably governments try to put on information released to the public.

- Politicians are wary of statistics. In totalitarian states "unacceptable" statistics are suppressed. In democracies Ministers don't mind when statistics put the Government in a good light but tend to wriggle when they show all is not well. They know that fiddling the figures is unrealistic but that doesn't stop them trying to influence their "presentation".

- The fact that Ministers can be uneasy about statistics underlines their importance as a public commodity. Unfortunately the public can often find them boring and difficult to understand.

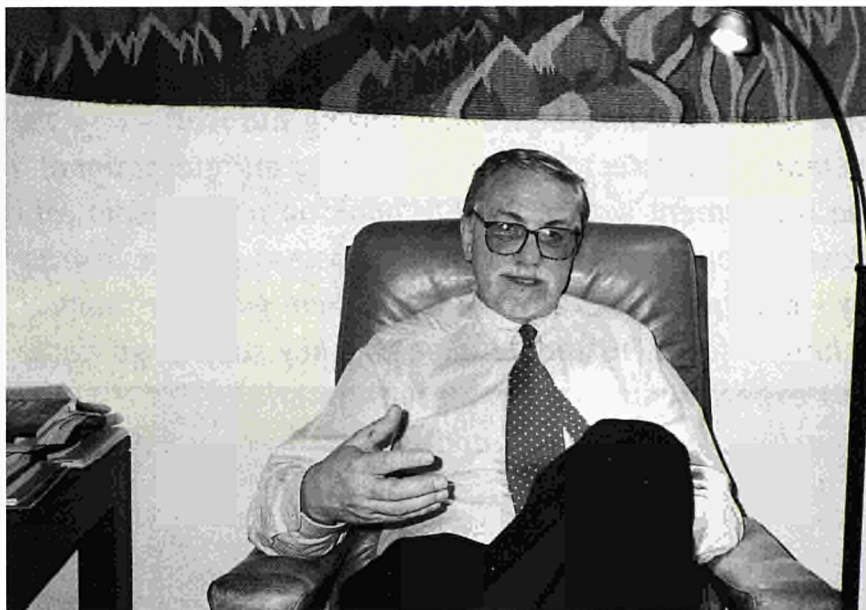
- The news media, finely tuned to the public mood, tend to reflect this attitude. (Incidentally, this also makes it easier for politicians to sweep "difficult" statistics under the carpet).

- Therefore, the aim of a national statistical office should be to show the public, through the media, that statistics are *important* by making them *interesting*. And by the nature of their release - self-evidently free of political manipulation - to enhance their credibility. Statistics that are not believed are of no use to anyone.

Public confidence is vital

In most mature countries of the world there is the firm view that public confidence in official statistics is a vital ingredient of democracy and must be maintained by a clear separation from the political process. There is an acute awareness of the sensitivities involved - of where the line should be drawn. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Scandanavia...

For example, **Jan Carling, Director-General of Statistics Sweden**, told me: "We don't give figures in advance - not even to the responsible Minister or even to the Prime Minister. He sees them at



Jan Carling - "We don't give figures in advance"

the same time as everyone else." And, he added, if the Government tried to change the rules this would "create a debate that would make it impossible".

This firm line was echoed when I discussed the matter with **Timo Relander, Director-General of Statistics Finland**. He told me that his Government has no power to stop them issuing any particular statistics. "We have defined some five statistical series - including unemployment and inflation - that are very sensitive, which could affect the stockmarkets etc. Everyone - from news media to the Prime Minister -

gets them at the same time: seven o'clock in the morning. This system works. Four years ago our Minister was able to see them beforehand. But Finland is a small country and the influence of statistics has increased with the freeing of the market and other economic changes. We need that sort of regulation now.

"Independence from the political process is one of the basic principles in this kind of work in all Western countries." One might add: in all countries that claim to be democratic.

The European Commission's view

This principle of a clear split between official statistics and the political process is accepted unequivocally by the European Commission. In autumn 1993 strict guidelines were proposed for the issue of Eurostat news releases by **Commission Vice-President Henning Christophersen** whose brief embraced Eurostat. They were promptly endorsed by **President Jacques Delors** as "essential". Mr Christophersen, a Dane, cannot have been unmindful of the sturdy independence of Statistics Denmark. The guidelines included the following observations:

Clearly, there will be occasions on which the timing and content of particular news releases will be sensitive for political reasons. If this occurs officials or Cabinets may attempt to either alter the content of a news release or change the time of issue. Indeed, this has happened on one or two occasions.

In Member States and other major countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia there are strict rules separating the issue of official statistics from the political process. It is argued that the credibility of official statistics depends on their independence and the inability of government officials or politicians to interfere in any way with their release.

The same arguments apply to the regular news releases issued by Eurostat; even more so, because Eurostat cannot afford to fall short of the best practice of Member States - indeed, it should set a lead. If journalists become aware of any attempt to change the content or timing of Eurostat news releases because of political sensitivity - and journalists do easily become aware of these things - then they will draw their own conclusions: that Eurostat statistics are not independent and not to be trusted. This could be immediately damaging, not only to Eurostat but to the Commission as a whole.



Former EC Vice-President Henning Christophersen - issued strict guidelines for Eurostat news releases



Timo Relander - "Everyone gets our data at the same time"

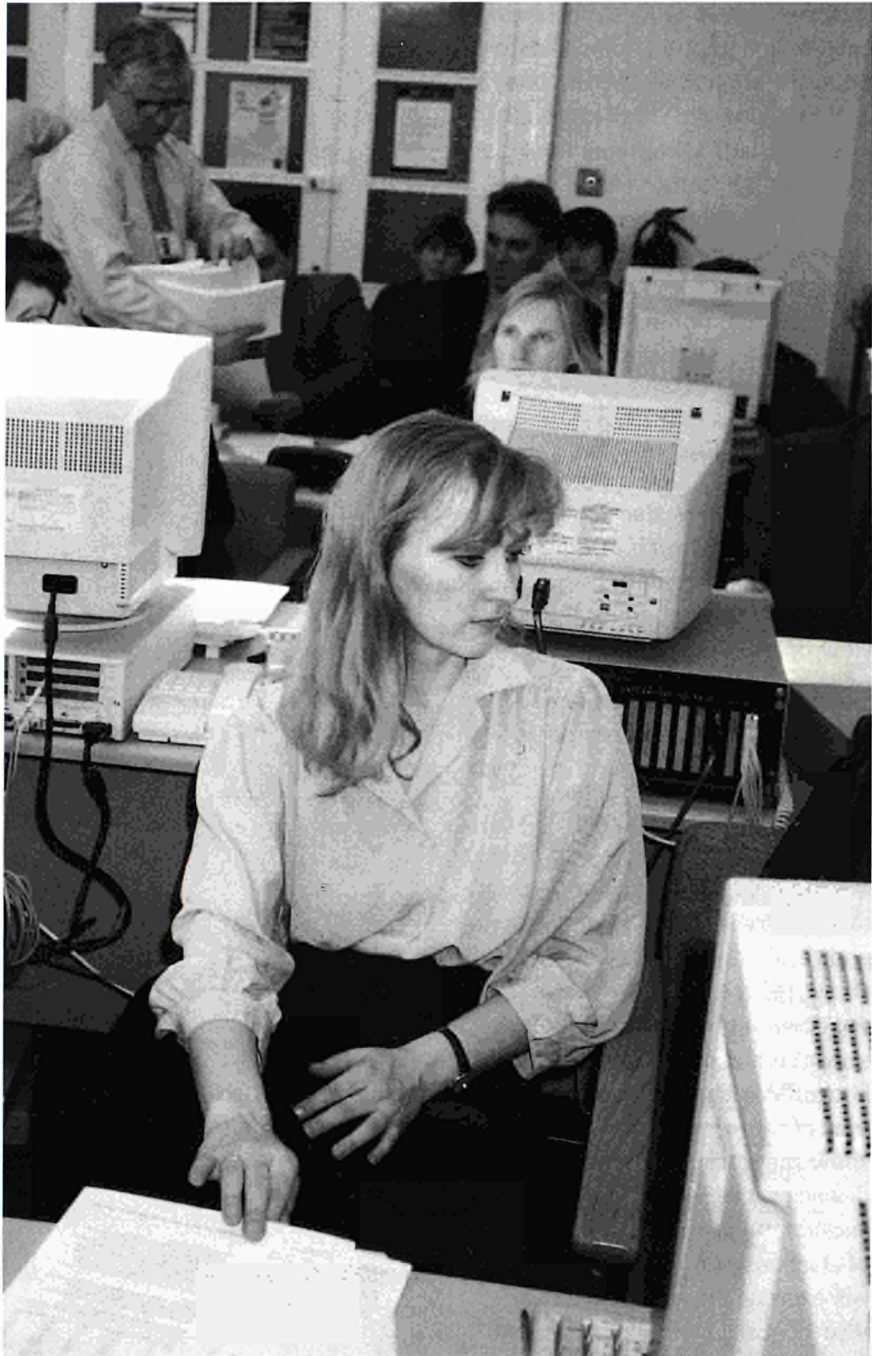
Press remains suspicious

One of the people I turned to for a journalistic perspective on this subject was **Robert Chote**, **Economics Editor of the Financial Times**, a newspaper produced in London but with half its sales outside the United Kingdom, and a major user of statistics.

Mr Chote described the release of UK unemployment statistics by the employment Ministry before responsibility for the figures was transferred to the Central Statistical Office (now the Office for National Statistics) in 1995. The same press officers who handed out the statistical news releases to journalists every month "also handed out a piece of paper quoting the Minister saying how wonderful the figures were".

That, Mr Chote observed, might or might not have been true. "The press are pretty confident that they can't necessarily trust the politicians, and such an arrangement does make them slightly suspicious about whether they can trust the numbers. So the extent to which it is possible to separate political comment on official statistics from their delivery is enormously helpful to the credibility of the statistical agency as truthful, accurate and objective.

"If you can tell the news media that you are only going to inform Government Ministers about a particular set of numbers 24 or 48 hours before the rest of the world then that is one way to establish a reputation as a statistical agency prepared to tell the news whether good or bad, leaving the Government to comment in whatever way it likes."



Handing out a news release in the "lock-up" room of the Office for National Statistics in London. But on this occasion the recipients are not journalists but members of a Training of European Statisticians course on news media relations from Central and Eastern European countries, learning about "best practice"

To which I would add: even better if you can avoid telling **Ministers at all before the data are released to the news media. The best model, in my view, is a "level playing field": everyone, be he or she journalist or Government Minister, receiving the data at the same time.**

A difficult path to tread

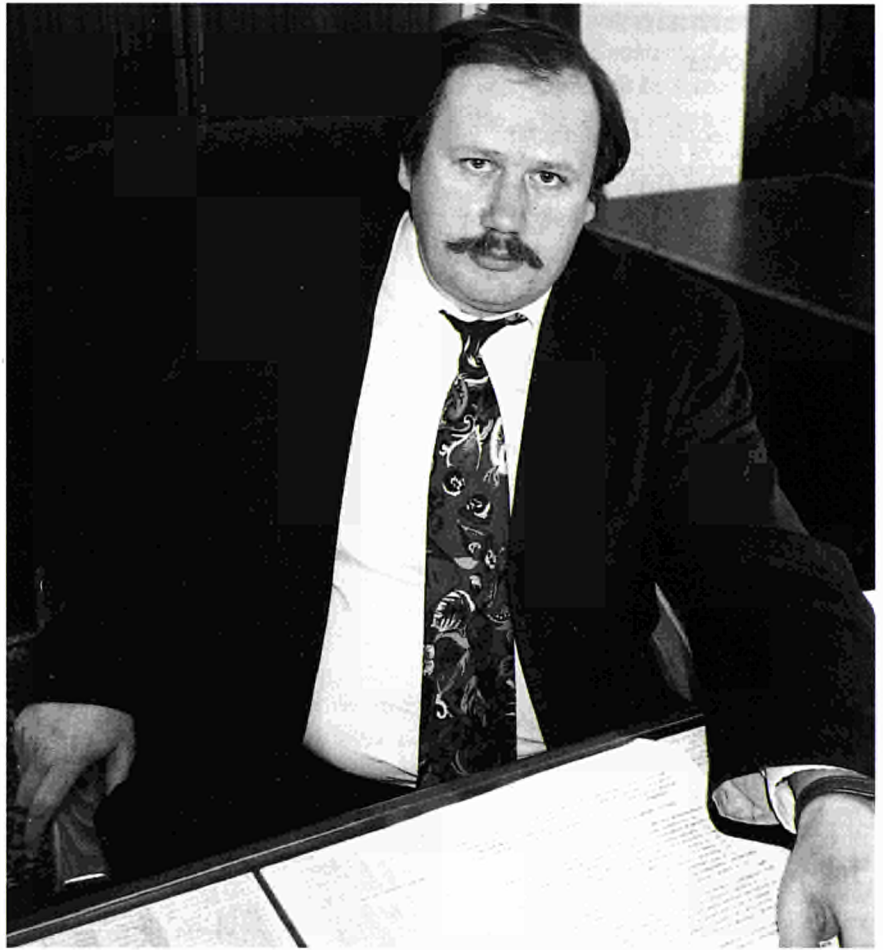
Separation of statistics from the hurly-burly of everyday politics is often a difficult path to tread. As Head of Information at the UK CSO (1989-92) I remember several disagreements with the Prime

Minister's press office who found it difficult to accept that official statistics were not just another asset to be deployed in the cause of presenting Mrs Thatcher's Government in a positive light. And former Heads of the UK CSO have been prepared to resign if Ministerial pressure in certain "politically sensitive" areas of official statistics were not lifted. It never came to that, but that such difficulties arise in one of the world's oldest democracies is a warning to statisticians everywhere.

Those in the new democracies are keenly aware of such potential flashpoints. In Moscow I was immensely heartened by the robust view of **Yuri A Yurkov, President of the Russian Federation's State Committee on Statistics (Goskomstat)**:

"The problem", he told me, "is that there is always someone who doesn't like the results (of statistics) - government or trade unions or managers or people. But a statistical office must always tell the truth. It must resist the political pressure - from which side it comes it does not matter. I know this is the problem in all countries of the world. But as far as I know the statistical community is defending itself with all its will. I don't exclude the possibility that on the eve of elections in Russia they (politicians) will exercise pressure and display their concern. I know many statisticians in many countries and this is the problem for many of them."

The priority must be to have a system that is clearly understood and difficult for politicians to manipulate for short-term gain. The difficulty is that despite widespread understanding and acceptance of the necessity for independent statistics that command public confidence, many politicians, even the most sophisticated ones, still feel they can call the tune. As most national statistical offices depend on government funding and are staffed by civil servants, such



Yuri A Yurkov - "There's always someone who doesn't like the statistics"

pressures can be hard to resist. Clearly, the ideal solution is to have legislation on statistical independence in such matters. For example, Section 13 of Ireland's 1993 *Statistics Act* stipulates:

The Director-General shall have the sole responsibility for and be independent in the exercise of the functions of deciding -

- a) the statistical methodology and professional statistical standards used by the (Central Statistics) Office;*
- b) the content of statistical releases and publications issued by the Office; and*
- c) the timing and methods of dissemination of statistics compiled by the Office.*

Whether or not a country has a Statistics Act, it is obviously desirable to have a Head of the Office with access to the highest echelons of government and who is prepared to fight to the point of very

public resignation if he or she feels public confidence in statistics is under threat. The Irish Act, for example, states:

The Director-General shall have the right to consult the Taoiseach (the Prime Minister) concerning any matters affecting the Office or relating to official statistics or the administration of this (Statistics) Act.

Similarly, the Director of the Office for National Statistics in the UK, although he does not have the benefit of a Statistics Act, does have clearly-defined rules which include direct access to the Prime Minister if he feels public confidence in statistics is under threat.

In Prague, **Edvard Outrata, President of the Czech Statistical Office**, described for me their new *Statistics Act*:

"It states that I am independent in all decisions affecting methodology, all aspects of data collection and date and time of publication. For example, we are starting a tradition of announcing exact publication dates a long time ahead. Inflation is published on the tenth working day of each month and everybody knows that.

"There will also be a Statistics Council that I shall choose from people respected in society and the media. For me that will be protection - I can say they approved my actions. Otherwise I could be quite isolated by the Government, or even the opposite - lumped with the Cabinet."

Mr Outrata is the highest-placed civil servant proper in the Czech

Republic. As he says: "The position of the CSO is extremely elevated." He attends Cabinet meetings. If, he told me, the Government wants to fire him this has to be approved by the Cabinet under the eyes of the press. All this gives him a great deal of independence.

Key elements

Let us now sum up the key elements in a national statistical office's relationship with the news media - the ideal model, if you like. By definition, of course, these considerations also establish the official statistician's general position in the national fabric. (It goes without saying, of course, that the statistics themselves must

be of the highest possible quality: timely, relevant, accurate and compiled according to methodology that is fully transparent and beyond reproach):

- An acceptance of the vital necessity of a clear separation between the release of official statistics and the political process.

- Clear and published rules for the release of data to the news media - perhaps even enshrined in legislation eg a *Statistics Act*.

- A Director of the Office who is recognised as independent, who has direct access if necessary to the Head of Government, and who is prepared to resign if he feels statistical integrity is irreconcilably compromised.

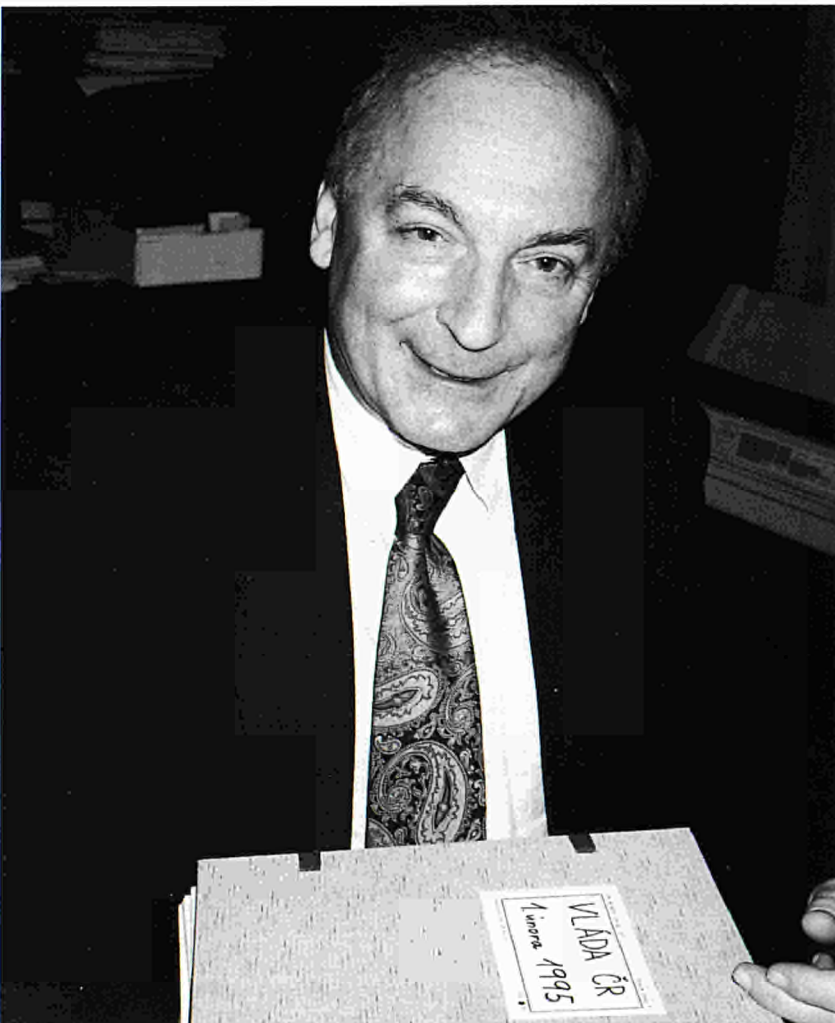
- A culture in which there would be a public outcry if the integrity of the statistical office were under political threat.

- Influential support for established release procedures and the independence of the Director and the Office - perhaps a statistical advisory committee; members might include employers, trade unionists, economists, academics and (a good idea this!) perhaps even a journalist.

- Publishing release dates of key statistics as far ahead as possible.

- Distancing the Office from any political comment or reaction to the data being released.

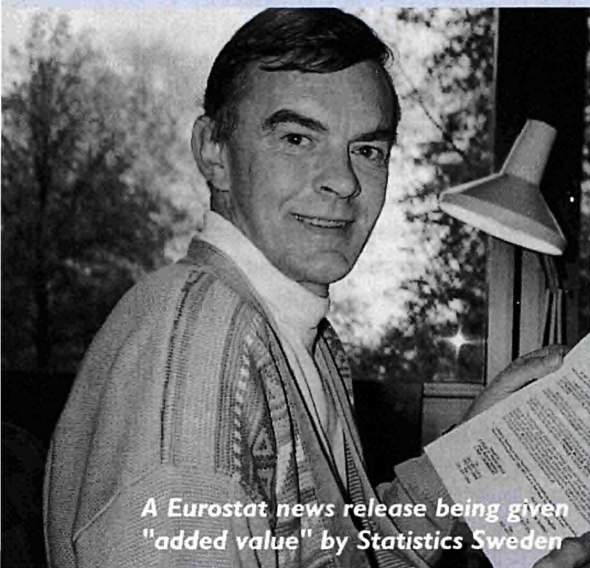
- A high standard of professionalism in news media relations. Allied to this an acute appreciation that the best way of protecting the integrity of official statistics is to create for them a high degree of public awareness and interest, and that this can be done best through the news media.



Edvard Outrata - "If Government wants to fire me it will be under the eyes of the press"

Eurostat & the news media

A journalistic approach



A Eurostat news release being given "added value" by Statistics Sweden

How does Eurostat deal with the news media? What has been achieved in recent years? What is the underlying philosophy of this relationship?

The Eurostat approach to news media relations is essentially a journalistic one and can be summed up as

- giving the right product to the right people in the right way at the right time, and
- monitoring the results.

The right product

Eurostat believes it is counter-productive to issue huge amounts of data to the news media. There are lots of statistics that will make a "story" for the press but inevitably many will simply disappear down a black hole. The media cannot use it all. At some stage there has to be a process of selection. You may not even like what they select and how they present it.

Why not make the selection ourselves by applying journalistic judgement about what constitutes a story and offering the result to the media in a way they immediately recognise as user-friendly? At Eurostat our front-line method of press communication is putting a good old-

fashioned piece of paper - a news release - in front of them.

There will, of course, be data that must be issued regularly: in Eurostat's case, major macro-economic indicators such as inflation, unemployment, GDP and industrial production. But there is no excuse for not presenting these journalistically. The less the press have to change what you issue, the less the risk of their making a mistake and publishing something that might cause you problems. The knack, we believe, is marrying your needs to theirs.

Among the wealth of less crucial material, rather than disseminate it in a "scatter-gun" way, we seek out that we know will make a "story". Our general rule is that if it is about people or activities that most of us as citizens are concerned about or have an interest in, then here are the makings of something that will attract press attention. We ask ourselves the question: How does this affect the lives or interests of ordinary people?

Topics can range from the changing role of women in society through to the challenge of being elderly or data on health

problems - eg AIDS. If we care to think about it, we all know the subjects that interest one another - and these are the topics that will also interest the news media.

The right way / the right people

When selected, the data must be presented in a way that immediately leads the journalist to think that here is something that will appeal to his or her readers/listeners/viewers.

We are lucky in Eurostat. We can issue our news releases to the 500-600 journalists accredited to the EC when they gather for their daily noon press briefing in EC Headquarters in Brussels. They represent virtually all the main news media outlets in the world.

Clearly, our "product" has to stand out from the rest of the EC releases. This is not just a question of making it eye-catching: we have carefully established a reputation for giving good "stories" in our releases, so that when journalists see our distinctive blue and yellow paper they know it bears something worthy of their time and attention.

Another key thing is to make sure our releases go to agencies that cover large sections of the media. Get your story issued by Reuters and it goes all over the world; get it on their advance news schedule and the whole world knows it is coming.

Being associated with the Commission gives us other advantages, too. We can send the release in advance to Commission Representations in the 15 Member States, the United States and Japan and have the added value of their efforts in publicising them to their national media. We also send in advance to the national statistical offices of Member States and many of them target particular national media

news release

EU

No 43/96
12 July 1996

Jobless rate unchanged

EU UNEMPLOYMENT: 10.8% IN MAY

18.1 million people out of work

EU16 seasonally-adjusted unemployment stood at 10.8% in May, the same as the revised figure for April. Eurostat - the Statistical Office of the European Communities - reports today. In May last year the rate was 10.7%.

From the start of the year unemployment fell slightly in Spain (from 22.6% in January to 22.1% in May), in Belgium (10.1% to 9.6%) and in Denmark (8.5% to 8.1%).

In Portugal and Sweden it went up: in the former from 7.3% to 7.6% and in the latter from 9.2% to 10.2%. The jobless rate in Germany, which was rising earlier this year, was unchanged at 8.9% in May.

Luxembourg continued with the EU's lowest rate, 3.1%, followed by Austria's 4.1%. Highest is Spain.

In comparison with the EU, the US rate is running at 5.6% with 3.5% in Japan.

Eurostat estimates that 18.1 million people were unemployed in the EU in May. This is a seasonally-adjusted figure in line with ILO criteria.

Notes

The right product: Eurostat news release on unemployment

groups. In some Central and Eastern European countries some national statistical offices perform the same service for us. Our release go out on the Internet, via Europa, the EC service-provider. And we can use the facility of Europe-by-satellite, by which journalists gathered in the different Representations can be briefed directly by satellite television from the Commission in Brussels.

The right time

Clearly, you need to release statistics at a time convenient to the media rather than yourselves. Noon is our time: given the way the media operate, much later is not advisable. Our time is also tied to the Commission briefing.

The general rule is data are released as soon as possible after they become available. There can be pressures to hold back a release because the timing is "sensitive". Such pressures need to be resisted and the essential criterion followed.

Sometimes we prepare a release for a specific event: for example, statistical dossiers for journalists at EC conferences on the Mediterranean and Asia. This has been a recent and successful development.

Monitoring the results

The reasons for this are fairly obvious. It gives the Office - the statisticians who produce the figures - quick, positive feedback and helps us judge the effectiveness of our efforts: how our "product" is "selling".

At Eurostat we monitor the European press very carefully. In 1995 we monitored a total of 26,804 column centimetres in the press. The value we put on this was 9 million ECU. The formula used to arrive at such a value is quite simple. We multiply the number of column centimetres by the average cost of display advertising in the European national press. We multiply this figure by two to allow for estimat-



Coverage of Eurostat's news release on EU unemployment

ed coverage not picked up and then by two again to allow for the added value of editorial coverage as opposed to paid advertising.

We now believe that our news release programme, which began at the beginning of 1992, achieves significantly more media coverage for Eurostat than that achieved by OECD.

And finally...

For the approach we have described here - the journalistic approach - to be successful there are certain steps which a statistical office must take:

We believe it is important to have someone in charge of the press operation with the necessary journalistic/press relations skills and experience to make it work - someone who knows what makes news.

Those who run the office must have the courage and imagination to adopt a course that may not please some elements of the organisation who might think their work is being trivialised. It may also displease the political "masters" who are frequently ill at ease with the stories that statistics tell. Pressures to bend to the political will must be resisted if media and public confidence are to be maintained.

The objective should also remain firmly in view: it is to enhance the credibility of official statistics and the reputation of those who produce and issue them by bringing them to the attention of as many people as possible. This will only happen if you make them interesting. And what, might one ask, is the use of statistics that are not interesting?

The essential argument about credible official statistics being one of the cornerstones of democracy should constantly be borne in mind and deployed frequently - even to the point of boredom; because it is absolutely fundamental.

If one thinks this way about news media relations the process could lead to examining other aspects of one's statistical operation. Close and productive contact with the media is an excellent way of keeping a statistical office in touch with the mood and tastes of the public, which, as the news media are the first to appreciate, are constantly shifting and changing. In other words, it might help one's statistics to be more relevant to people's needs.

And, after all, isn't that why we produce statistics?

News media relations for NSIs in transition.

A guide to best practice

Eurostat is publishing a guide to news media relations for national statistical offices in transition to a market economy. It is written by **John Wright**, former press chief of the UK Central Statistical Office, who established the system of news media relations now employed with considerable success by Eurostat. The 80-page book, *Statistics in the news*, was due to be available this autumn.

In a foreword, Yves Franchet, Director-General of Eurostat, gives this message to NSIs in transition countries:

It is self-evident that the relationship between a national statistical office and the news media is a pivotal one. It is one to be developed carefully and protected jealously by statisticians everywhere.

This relationship is what this book is all about. It is written especially for countries that are still in the process of developing their statistical systems. It brings together a wealth of experience in this field in an attempt to suggest a model of best practice. There are many ways of dealing with the media and particular national cir-

cumstances can influence these. So it is difficult to be prescriptive about the best way. But there are certain basic rules and these are discussed...

I hope that this publication will be of some assistance to those national statistical offices in transition who I know realise the importance of establishing a successful relationship with the press. I wish them well on the road ahead - and look forward to reading about their statistics in my newspaper!

Statistics must be credible

Chapter 1 of the book discusses the importance of good news media relations for NSIs. It stresses the vital necessity of the separation of official statistics from the political process and the key role of the media in protecting the independence and integrity of NSIs. The point is emphasised by quoting several Heads of NSIs, including some from countries in transition. And the Chapter has this to say:

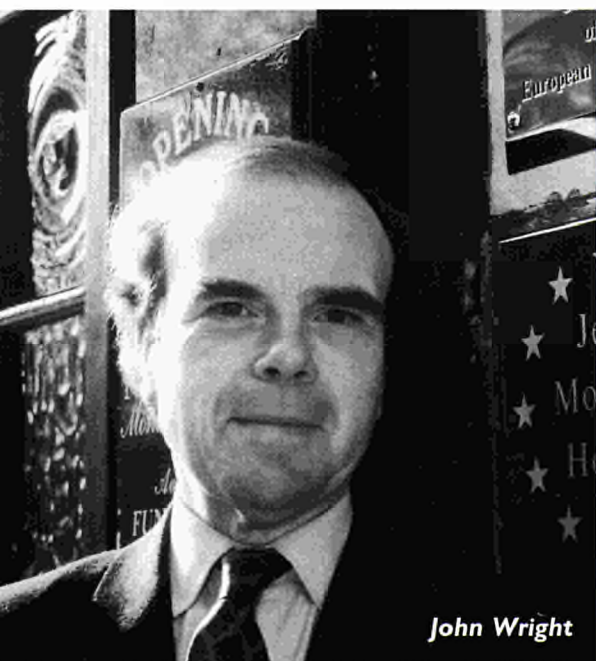
"The aim of a national statistical office should be to show the public,

through the media, that statistics are important by making them interesting. And by the nature of their release - self-evidently free of political manipulation - to enhance their credibility. Statistics that are not believed are of no use to anyone."

Chapter 2 covers the establishment of an effective news media service including the following aspects:

- What to issue to the news media
- How to issue it
- "Know your media"
- The international dimension
- Logistics - the "nuts & bolts"
- Measuring success.

This is followed by the perspective of a journalist, Robert Chote, Economics Editor of the Financial Times in London. He stresses that the relationship between the news media and the NSI should not be "us and them" but cooperation for mutual benefit. He explains what makes news in a statistical context, how an NSI can make a journalist's job easier, and how to counter the natural suspicions of the media about official data.



John Wright

THE AUTHOR

John Wright was Head of News Media Relations for the United Kingdom Central Statistical Office from 1989 to 1992. He was then seconded to Eurostat in Luxembourg to establish and develop a press service. He left at the end of 1995 and is now a consultant in news media relations, based in Oxford.

He began his career as a journalist and then for 28 years was a news media specialist in the UK Government Information Service, rising to a senior level. He was Deputy Chief of Public Relations of the

Ministry of Defence in the mid-80s and subsequently Head of Information of the Cabinet Office. He served an earlier spell in the CSO (1974-78) as Chief Press Officer.

He has a particular interest in helping statistical offices in transition countries to develop effective news media relations, and in February 1996 directed a Training for European Statisticians course on this subject for representatives of 12 Central and Eastern European countries, followed by a seminar on this same topic and for the same range of countries in Brussels in July (see article on Page 32).

Down-to-earth advice

Chapter 3 covers in a down-to-earth and practical way the art of writing statistical news releases. Contents include:

- The key role of news releases
- Selecting the subject
- Structure of releases
- Headlines and introductions
- Body text and other tips
- Analysis of a Eurostat release
- An alternative from the UK
- More examples of news releases: lessons to be learned.

Chapter 4 concerns press briefings, news conferences etc: when and how to hold them; organising one; question-and-answer briefs; use of embargoes; requirements of television and radio and of press photographers; and creating a "media event".

Chapter 5 gives, as case studies, the views of news media relations from three official statistical offices: the United Kingdom - setting up a new press office; Eurostat - starting from scratch; and Canada - their recent major reform aimed at "seducing" the news media.

Appendices include a table of statistical news release practices in the European Union - a "snapshot" survey by Eurostat on preparation, publication and political control.

Statistics in the news is free of charge. Details of availability from:

Eurostat Unit C5
Bâtiment Jean Monnet
Luxembourg L-2920
Tel: (352) 4301 32806
Fax (352) 4301 32139

VITAL ROLE OF NEWS MEDIA

In his foreword to Statistics in the news, Mr Franchet says:

Two significant trends of recent history have been the burgeoning of democracy - especially and most gratifyingly in the countries of the former Soviet bloc - and of the "information society". In a sense these are trends that go hand in hand: information - people's desire to know the truth about their country and beyond - fuels the democratic process; democracy is in significant part based on the flow of information and access to it.

Statistics play a key role in all this. They demonstrate the health of a country in so many respects, both economic and social. They show the population how well or badly their Government is managing the essentials. They highlight welcome developments, disturbing trends - nationally as well as in organisations such as the European Union.

Many people think statistics are as dry as dust. In fact, they are part of the lifeblood of society - and a cornerstone of democracy. And they are destined to become more and more important as we enter the 21st century, as the information society achieves even greater significance.

Governments know the power of statistics. Even in the most advanced democracies the temptation for them to try to influence the public presentation of key data for some perceived short-term gain can be overwhelming. This makes the independence of official statistics from the political process vital for the well-being of democracy.

The best way to safeguard statistical independence is to bring knowledge and appreciation of statistics to the attention of as many people as possible. This is where the news media play a vital role: only they have the power and influence - and today this power is immense and increasing - to reach out to the public at large. And this is why statistical offices must learn to use the media to reach the millions of people who depend on newspapers, television and radio as their main - and often only - source of information about the world around them.

The news media also play a major role in protecting statistical offices from political interference. Once release procedures are established and promulgated - perhaps by law or simply by acknowledged precedent - then the media can assume a role as protector of the public interest in seeing there is no political manipulation.

All national statistical offices place great importance on their relationship with the news media. Here we look at how that relationship is conducted in four Member States. First, Germany...

Statistical news releases in Germany – a duty, not an option

by Barbara Jakob

It is 8.10 am Liesel Heitzenröder has already finished much of her work by the time her colleagues in the press office of Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Statistical Office) in Wiesbaden arrive at their desks. Statistisches Bundesamt always issues its press releases at 8 am.

News agencies in particular insisted that press releases be made available at a fixed time on a given date - and simultaneously. Advance notice is generally given – so everyone knows what is coming out and when.

The ten-strong team under Angela Schaff, head of the press office since June 1993, issues some 400 press releases a year. It also prepares press conferences to announce GDP figures and presents the Statistical Yearbook and other publications, and organises briefings at which journalists are given details of latest statistical developments. Finally, they must answer and forward queries by journalists, which total around 16,000 a year, by phone and in writing.

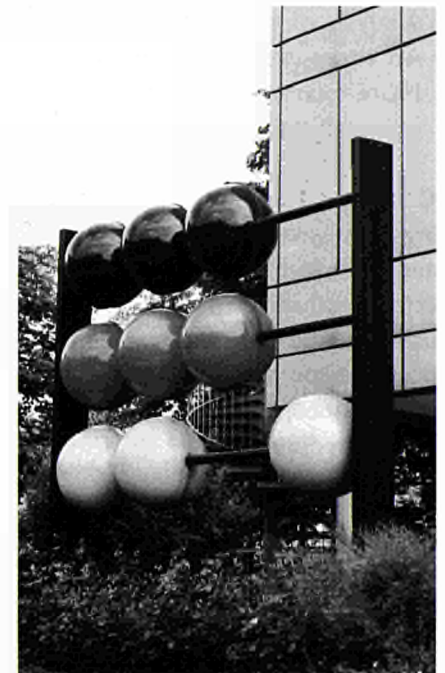
In an election year, leave may even be stopped and considerable overtime worked. This is because the President of the

Statistisches Bundesamt is also chief electoral officer for the Federal elections, and as such responsible for conducting elections and presenting official results. At such times, the press office is strained to the limit.

New priorities

Things used to be different, remembers Mrs Heitzenröder, the press office's longest-serving member. Egon Hölder, President of the Statistisches Bundesamt from 1983 to 1992, was one of the first people to recognise the importance of publicity and promote the FSO's routine media work. At a time when data protection was back on the agenda and once again the subject of heated debate, as in the '70s, he thought it imperative to move more into the public eye and make statistics more popular. He increased the number of press office staff, stressed its importance by making it report directly to him, made personal appearances in public and maintained close links with well-known journalists. Statistisches Bundesamt is still reaping the benefits of Hölder's work.

The daily press releases issued by the Statistisches Bundesamt are highly valued by journalists.



Every morning this over-sized abacus reminds statisticians of the German Statistisches Bundesamt of their task

Dawning realisation

The importance of the FSO's working relationship with the media is illustrated by press coverage of industrial statistics in the summer of 1995. The changeover to the EU-wide standard classifications of goods and branches of economic activity (PRODCOM, NACE) led to delays in the publication of short-term economic data. Although journalists had been told the reasons, the lack of short-term economic data eventually led to an outcry in the press. Articles were published about "government

statisticians leaving economic researchers to grope in the dark for months on end", and figures not being worth the paper they were written on. The FSO should have taken this as a compliment, as it showed how highly regarded its data are, and how smoothly the dissemination normally functions.

But back to every day life in the press office. Most releases sent out by Mrs Heitzenröder day-to-day are classic press releases – specialist information covering the whole range of FSO's work, from the number of persons injured on the roads to wages and salaries, from public sector debt to key industrial and short-term economic data. The large number of press releases is a quirk of German official statistics. The law requires information to be published, so the press office cannot simply select the most interesting or important data. However, the monthly *Zahlen-Fakten-Trends* (Figures-facts-trends) series – which aims to stimulate in-depth discussion of results, thus meeting a demand for more detailed information – and *Statistik von A-Z* (An A to Z of statistics) – which explains statistical terms – represent new departures.

A surprising success

The success of a particular series of press releases, the *Zahl der Woche* (Statistic of the week), surprised even Statistisches Bundesamt. While the press office welcomed this unexpected success, statisticians in the specialist departments had more mixed feelings. The series provides human interest information that sometimes gives surprising insights into society - topics have included, for example, the number of millionaires, consumption of ice during the summer months and paternity tests. The format of these releases also means they

can be used readily by journalists with no specialist knowledge of statistics. The danger of this popular approach, in the opinion of many statisticians, is over-simplification. However, it does provide a broader public for statistics, so the *Zahl der Woche* is set to stay.

By the time a press release goes out at 8 am, it has already come a long way. The original is produced in the specialist department and once signed by heads of division and sub-division is forwarded to the press office. Here an editorial check is carried out and any difficult statistical passages made intelligible to the media. Before the President and Vice-President of the FSO put their final signatures to the release, the changes are discussed with the relevant specialists.

Only then is the release issued, various distribution channels being used to reach subscribers. There are over 2,500 recipients, mainly media representatives but also trade associations, political parties, trade unions, enterprises, banks etc, on distribution lists broken down by some 70 subject areas.

Around 20 news agencies and financial information services, the leading national daily newspapers and TV and radio stations receive the releases via Telefax 400, a central fax distribution service provided free of charge by Deutsche Telekom. At present, most other recipients receive releases by post again, free of charge.

New ways forward

Keeping this immense distribution mechanism up to date takes up much of Mrs Heitzenröder's time. Disseminating information in this way is also very costly and is due to be replaced as soon as possible by broadcasting and high-tech solutions such as e-mail.

And for those familiar with the Internet, the latest official statistics can be called up directly on screen. Statistisches Bundesamt entered the WorldWideWeb (address: <http://www.statistik-bund.de>) at the CeBIT trade fair in Hanover in March, thus breaking new ground for the German statistical office in the dissemination of official statistics. *Der Spiegel*, the German news magazine, ranked the FSO sixth in the top 10 German organisations on the Internet.

The screenshot shows the website interface for Statistisches Bundesamt. At the top, it says 'Statistisches Bundesamt' and 'Pressestelle' with a logo of three spheres. Below this is the heading 'Pressedienste'. A central box contains several links: 'Aktuelle Pressemitteilungen', 'Wichtige Pressemitteilungen', 'Pressemitteilungen nach Sachgebieten', 'Pressemitteilungen 1996 chronologisch', 'Zahl der Woche', and 'Terminvorschau'. Below this box is a link for 'Kontakt zur Pressestelle'. At the bottom, there is a navigation bar with icons for 'Impressum', 'Homepage', 'Ansprechpartner', and 'Web-Service'. A blue banner at the bottom of the screenshot contains the text: 'From March this year Statistisches Bundesamt has offered a service on the Internet'.

Statistics, the media and the Dutch

by Rudy Schreijnders and Henry van Haagen,
Press Office, Statistics Netherlands

National statistical institutes have always generated impressive quantities of figures gratefully received by specialists within government and the academic community. Statistics Netherlands has rarely had problems reaching such audiences since they are greatly interested in our figures and know where to find us when they need them.

But we also wish to reach the public at large. And the Dutch majority is not so much silent as passive!

This means Statistics Netherlands has to pursue and interest them actively, and that our data have to be accessible in more ways than one. The media are a great help in this.

Key socio-economic figures are in great demand in the financial markets. The figures must be up-to-date. A press release quickly brings new data to their attention as well informing non-specialists.

Since Statistics Netherlands is funded mainly by taxpayers' money, through the Ministry of Economic Affairs, it has a duty to inform the public and disseminate its information as widely as possible.

Recent budget cuts have made us realise that Statistics Netherlands is dependent on wide popular support. We have started to look at the demand for our figures and how we can increase it. We feel we can stimulate demand by informing the public through the media when new figures are available.

Statistics Netherlands currently publishes about one press release a day.

Producing what journalists can use

In the 80s specialists were the main target of our press releases. These releases were, in fact, quite difficult to understand: many technical details, lots of figures and full of statistical nuances. A 'table in words' is a good description: interesting to specialists, but fairly useless to the general public. The problem with such press

releases was that journalists had to 'translate' them, as it were. Articles based on them were often criticised by our statisticians: "These journalists just don't understand our press releases!" In fact the statisticians were not writing something journalists could use. As a result the releases had very limited results.

Another drawback is that our information is about the past. Journalists often want to know what we expect in the future. As a statistical institute the only forecasts we can give are on population. Our mission is to provide reputable and reliable statistical information, whereas predictions are often (if not always) wrong. Most journalists know this and look to us for reliable, solid background information on the every day changes they write about.

New policy

In the 90s, we started to write our press releases more for the general public. A press office was set up at Statistics Netherlands in 1992. There was a new policy with news value and success in communication as the basis. The message to statisticians was: Keep your press releases simple – don't use too many figures, especially in the lead.

The result was immediate. As soon as our press releases became easier to understand, more newspaper articles were

published. The press office used much of its resources in checking and editing drafts written by statisticians, limiting itself to communication aspects, trying not to interfere with the content.

The press office gave these guidelines for national press releases:

- The first paragraph (the lead) must contain the main news item. Think about your message before you start to write, otherwise it will be a table in words. The lead is often a summary – a focus – of the press release. Don't present all aspects: select the most interesting.

- Make the text short and jargon free. Have one table with the full results and keep this simple – or have one simple graph or figure to show the trend. Use headings that make journalists want to read more.

- Popular support for Statistics Netherlands can be increased only if the public knows it is the source of the information. Therefore our name has to be mentioned at least once in the lead.

Ready to answer questions

A spokesperson of the statistical division is named in the press release. The Dutch Ministries usually have very few spokespersons: only extremely well-trained specialists are allowed to speak to journalists. They often work in the external affairs or information departments. At Statistics Netherlands we followed the example of the universities: the statistician is his or her own spokesperson! We felt we had to choose this option: with over 400 statistical surveys it is very difficult for one or two press officers to know all the ins and outs. This



Rudy Schreijnders (left) and Henry van Haagen – good relations with the news media is their job at Statistics Netherlands

turned out to be very good for our image – more or less by accident. Journalists came to see us as a very open organisation.

The press office talks to journalists every day and can assist spokespersons in fielding interviews. We can prepare them for difficult questions, explain procedures and make the experience less nerve wracking. It is standard procedure to read the draft article before it is published, so we can add information, correct mistakes and comment on the tone of the article.

Every week the press office distributes a list of forthcoming press releases to journalists. Press releases are spread evenly throughout the week so there are no more than one or two a day. In this way our information is

not competing with itself and has a better chance in competition with other news.

We also organise press conferences and informal meetings with the press. This helps us create a network of journalists. We can send journalists background information if we know their particular interests. We also visit newsrooms to discuss our services and improve them in line with journalists' wishes. We plan with national radio, making them aware of newsworthy items.

Electronic dissemination

Traditionally we have distributed press releases by mail and fax. Fax speeded things up but it is simply not fast enough any more! Newspaper journalism is a com-

Press releases and coverage in the seven national newspapers, 1995	Number of press releases by Statistics Netherlands	Number of articles in the 7 national newspapers based on press releases	Number of articles per press release	News coverage* %
January	22	79	3.6	51
February	22	88	4.0	57
March	18	64	3.6	51
April	18	72	4.0	57
May	17	74	4.4	62
June	22	92	4.2	60
July	25	112	4.5	64
August	20	103	5.2	74
September	17	69	4.1	58
October	17	80	4.7	67
November	22	118	5.4	77
December	23	84	3.7	52
Total	243	1035	4.3	61

* amount of press releases x 7 (national newspapers) divided by number of articles

petitive business: everyone wants to be first, no one wants to be left behind. Data dissemination should be virtually simultaneous. This is especially important in the financial markets where money can be made or lost within seconds. In our dissemination process, there is an hour-and-a-half between the first and last faxed press release. Electronic dissemination seems the answer for the future.

■ **X25:** We try to meet users' wishes for electronic dissemination. X25 communication is almost real time: the most important socio-economic indicators are sent electronically to a limited number of general and financial news agencies. It is efficient and fast, with simultaneous access for the financial markets.

■ **E-mail:** More and more newsrooms have this. We send our press releases electronically

on request. This enables journalists to get off to a quick start after our 9.30 am standard distribution time by editing the press release on screen.

■ **PEP:** All Dutch Ministries distribute information electronically by PEP (electronic mail for press information). Statistics Netherlands also uses this channel, unlike other government agencies, which are not connected to it.

■ **Internet** is ideal for users who do not need information regularly. Statistics Netherlands also publishes its press releases on Internet Site <http://www.cbs.nl> with a summary in English. Down-loading of press releases is free of charge. The Internet gives many students easy access to statistical information. Journalists can check 24 hours a day if information they have is still up-to-date.

New worlds to conquer

Now that our press releases have been improved, the relationship with the media is professional, and articles based on statistical surveys are read by a growing number of people, can the press office sit back and relax? Of course we are happy with a success of our press releases. But new worlds are waiting to be conquered. In the next few years we hope for a foothold in television news and current affairs. This year some spokespersons received television training. The press office had been hesitant to encourage television interviews, but we now feel we have spokespersons who can get our message across to a wide audience on television, so that more people will, through the medium of our data, understand what is going on in the Netherlands.

Statistics and the press, Swedish-style

by Annika Östergren

"The mass media in Sweden use a lot of statistical material. Statistical data have a high news value because they often indicate that changes are afoot. Through the media, the general public gains access to information on changes in society and developing trends." Per-Åke Bladh speaking. He is head of Statistics Sweden's information and press service.

This service issues over 300 news releases each year. Around three-quarters of these are on the economy, covering topics such as prices, retail sales, balance of trade, investment in industry or capital markets. The remainder cover other Statistics Sweden (SCB) data – on the labour market, wages and salaries, training, research, welfare, agriculture, the environment etc.

The news releases go to 250 daily and weekly newspapers,

news agencies and radio and TV stations throughout the country. This is mainly by fax, although for the last year they have also been sent on-line to a national news agency which then forwards them within seconds via satellite to its subscribers.

"Apart from being quick, it means that the news agency's subscribers all receive the information at the same time", continues Mr Bladh. "Moreover, all the journalists in the editorial office can call up the news release directly on their own screens, whereas a fax message is seen only by the news editor who assesses its news value."

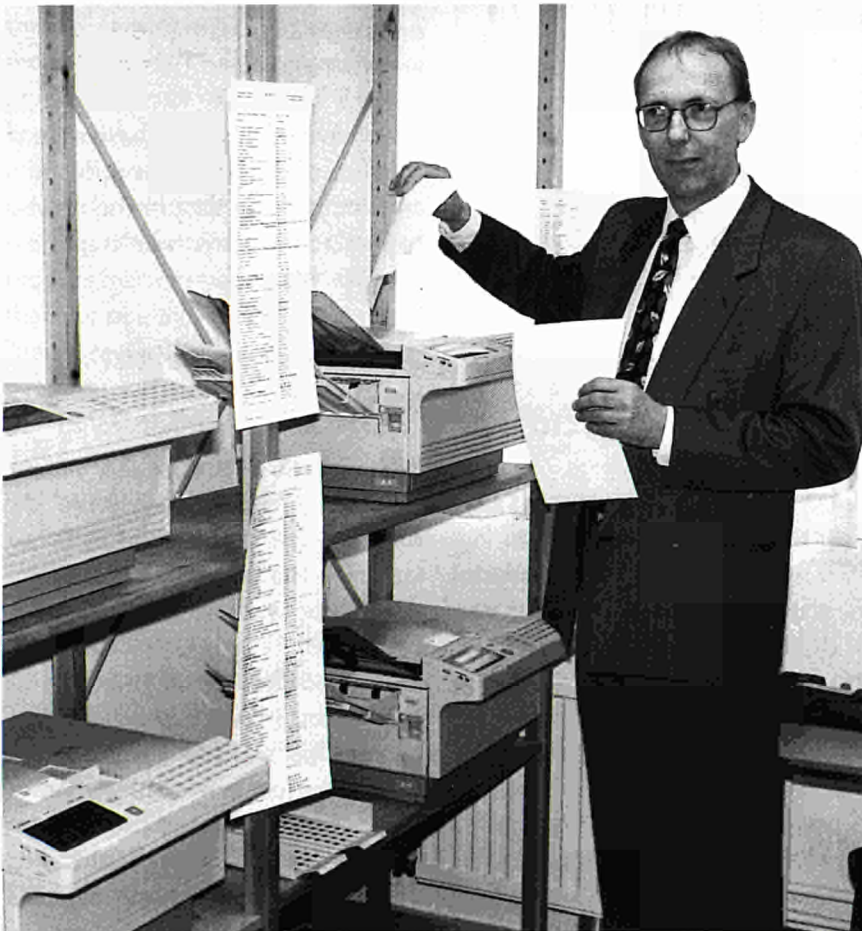
The news release is then stored in a database and can still be accessed after issue.

Internet not quick enough

Each afternoon, the SCB's home page on the Internet (<http://www.scb.se>) is updated with that day's press information. Although, as Per-Åke Bladh points out, this is not fast enough for daily press journalists, the service is still appreciated by the media.

In addition to all this, SCB organises press conferences two or three times a year.

These are when a press release is felt to be particularly news-



Per-Åke Bladh ensures the fax transmission is working smoothly



Maud Jinghede sends a news release electronically to the Swedish media

worthy or when SCB wishes to explain the results directly to journalists.

Every Friday the press service publishes a news release timetable for the following week. This makes it easier for the media to plan their statistical coverage and to prepare more in-depth articles.

Releases written by statisticians

Three people work for SCB's press service. They rarely write news releases themselves, leaving this to the appropriate statistical specialist. The press officers concentrate more on dissemination, and generally providing advice and training for the statisticians who prepare the texts. The statisticians profit from the feedback of experienced journalists, who offer them tips on how to ensure their releases do not end up in the newsroom rubbish bin. Another press service activity is

instructing colleagues in how to deal with the media, for example by training them in TV interview techniques.

The press service also gives courses for journalists. Sometimes it visits editorial offices and talks about SCB's work; on other occasions journalists come to SCB to discover how to tap sources of information offered by the data.

Hope for the future

Almost every day newspapers contain information based on SCB news releases or other data. To give employees an overall view of how SCB figures are used by the press, a weekly review of press cuttings from a selection of the largest dailies is compiled.

A copyright dispute between the Swedish Journalists' Association and newspaper publishers has prevented SCB from displaying daily newspaper articles on its

internal computer information system. The hope eventually was to reproduce the press clippings on a daily basis, rather than via weekly reviews.

"The advantage of this would be that we could comment upon and correct the data in the newspapers at the same time", says Per-Åke Bladh.

Selling statistical news

News releases are issued mainly to the media, but interest in direct information from SCB is so great that it can be sold. For this purpose news releases are presented in a different way and are called *Statistiska nyheter* (Statistical News). *Statistiska nyheter* has around 140 subscribers, mostly in banks, insurance companies, currency dealing houses and other financial institutions, who require rapid economic statistics as indicators of short-term economic trends.

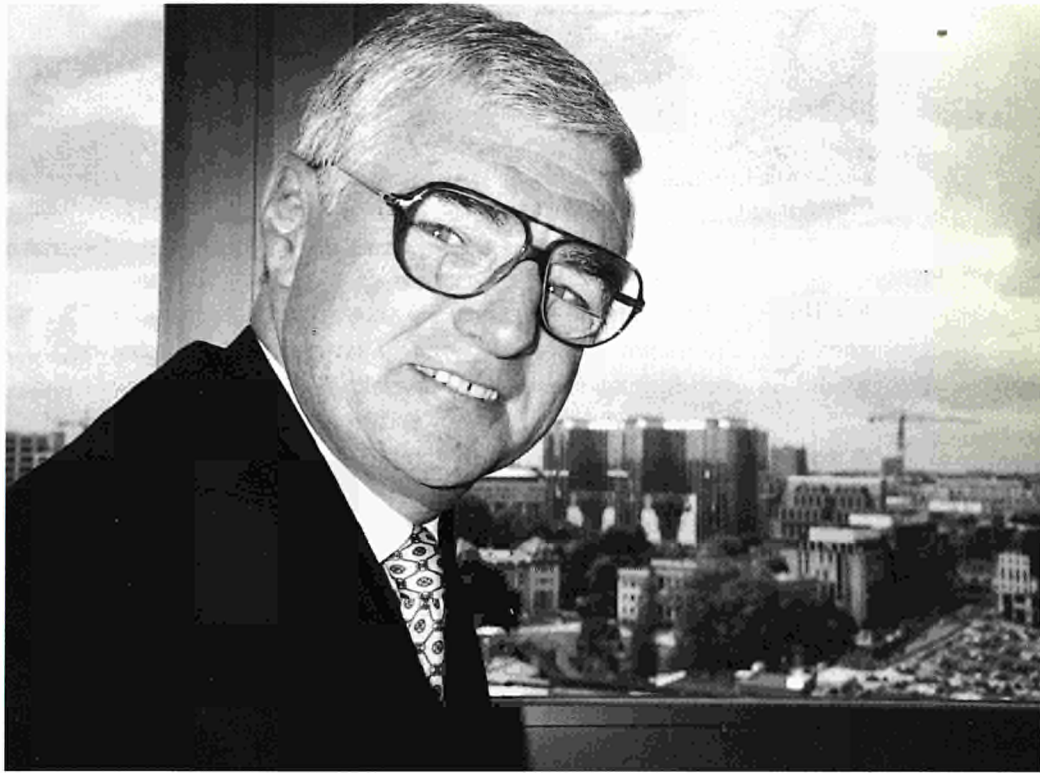
Seven years ago the UK Central Statistical Office underwent a major reorganisation. In the process it took a long hard look at its news media relations. Earlier this year the CSO merged with the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys to become the Office for National Statistics (ONS), with an even bigger media role. MIKE FINN is the colourful (and Irish) Senior Press Officer of the ONS. In this article - in conversation with Sigma's JOHN WRIGHT - he discusses statistics and the media UK-style.

The atomic clock and sunburnt pigs

Our working day is ruled by the clock - to the second. We release economic data exactly at 9-30am (we have an atomic clock!) to a programme announced three to four months in advance.

There is no perfect way to release data. Like an actor, we risk being judged by our last major "performance" ie economic announcement. Recently I had to announce a revision, an improvement, of £4 billion to the 1995 balance of payments. It was one of those statistical quirks where all the revisions were in the same direction. Six months before I had to announce that the one indicator that is "never revised", because so much hangs on it, the retail price index or rate of inflation, was wrong by 0.25%. As a result the government had to pay out some £20 million to holders of government stocks and national savings.

You might ask why am I still in a job. The reason the roof didn't fall in was because we have generated a considerable amount of goodwill among journalists in the seven years since the major reorganisation of the Central Statistical Office made us look long and hard at our relations with the news media.



Mike Finn

The system we evolved - and are still evolving - is by no means perfect yet but we have come a long way. In 1989 the CSO, then approaching 50 years of age, became a separate department, expanded to take on more economic data and with much more independence. We inherited statistics and media relations from several government departments. They had different histories, production and dissemination methods, timescales... We had to put it

all together in a coherent way, user-friendly to the media, and acceptable to everyone, particularly the statisticians.

We began by talking to the media and looking at what we might adopt in the methods of statistical offices in other countries.

We started from the basis that data publication dates would be announced as far ahead as possible. In the case of some series,



The ONS lock-up room but, instead of journalists, visitors from Central and Eastern European NSIs

like the RPI, this could be a year ahead; but the minimum period would be from four to six weeks.

A lot going for us

Then we asked ourselves what it was that we wanted to achieve, then worked backwards from there. We wanted reliable data produced to the highest professional standards, which was accessible, intelligible, readable etc and always issued in precisely the same way. We needed a time, a place and a venue for our statistical releases, and then we had to think about the audience.

We had a lot going for us. London is a major financial centre. The capital is the home of ten national newspapers. All the leading financial news agencies in the world are represented. The Stock Exchange is there. Parliament was just across the road from the CSO, Ministers are in the same building. Everything is easily accessible.

Against this background we started from the principle that data would be free to the news media and that a special room, part of the press office suite, would be set aside for dealing with them. We agreed with Reuters, Bloomberg, A-P Dow Jones etc that they could install equipment allowing direct transmission from the CSO to the world without going through an intermediate process.

To ensure data went out bang on time (11-30 in those days, 9-30 now) the news agencies needed them in advance. The system is that we allow them on the premises under my steely gaze some half-an-hour before release time. They can test their equipment and then switch it to red, which means they can't transmit. Then we give them the data.

This is the "lock-up". No one leaves the room - not even for the toilet - before I press a

buzzer at 9-30 exactly, whereupon they switch to the green light and transmit the stories they have produced on the basis of the statistical news release and what they have been told by statisticians or press officers.

We pride ourselves on data of the highest standards, free of any comment, political or otherwise, with no judgemental factors, nothing that says this is good news or bad news. The releases are written in a flat style, deliberately - strictly factual.

For the major series we have the statisticians themselves to brief the press in the lock-up period. This is another guarantee of our integrity. Here are the people involved in the creation of the series: who can tell the journalists where the data have come from, how they are compiled; who can answer simple factual background questions. *Is this the highest since...? The lowest since...? What do*

they mean? They may be quoted but more often than not they are not.

Journalists are very pleased with this - it gives them even more scope to assess and analyse the data. And it has reinforced us even more as a professional, independent agency.

Statisticians 'the real stars'

The name of the statistician who compiled the data and his or her 'phone number also appear on the front of the news release. This was the idea of our former Director, the Australian Bill McLennan. His (somewhat brutal) view was that this would concentrate minds wonderfully on the quality of the data in the release. A lot of statisticians were not very keen on the idea. It has turned them into quite well-known people. However, it has had the effect of making them much more confident in their dealings with the media and much more proud of the data.

The statisticians are the real stars of this process. They enjoy doing it now. They now belie my definition of an extrovert statistician: *someone who looks at your shoes when talking to you*. And over time this eyeball-to-eyeball contact with the media has helped to improve the series.

We know when the figures are bad and we anticipate the question *Are these the worst ever?* by getting the statistician to volunteer this information before the question is asked. This demonstrates that we have nothing whatsoever to hide. We have

very active participation by the media. Some of their suggestions and requests have led to changes in the format of the releases.

We also have a television hook-up for Reuters TV in a separate room: the statistician will go directly from the briefing and talk to camera. There's a live radio link for the BBC.

It can be seen that the lock-up and the events accompanying it area are an intense period. We do understand the pressure on the media. We do try to make it as easy for them as possible. Journalists are like my wife: "I love a surprise but can you tell me what it is?" They are by nature suspicious. If you change something or do something unannounced they will assume the worst possible motive. So we try to keep to standard formats. For example, our press releases give information in three ways on the front page: a table of figures, a graph and short narrative.

Facts are sacred, comment is free. We want the figures to be judged for themselves. There may be Ministers in the same building who want to comment on the data. If so, they have to do it separately - they have no part in our process of releasing the figures.

Too hot for pigs

There are also a lot of City analysts out there making forecasts about the statistics to be released, and whenever they get it wrong there is always some "explanation", like the unusual weather. Figures are very often judged against expectations and there is a whole industry out

there involved in this, which puts extra pressure on us. And then there are people, such as Reuters, who add up all the expectations to form a media consensus. If the data when released are not in line with these forecasts then they are labelled "surprising", "disappointing" or "dramatic". It's a very fraught world.

For briefings we have separated the news agencies from the newspapers. The latter have a separate briefing following the lock-up. They are not under the same instant pressure as the agencies. They are also more expert. They want to go into things in depth. This briefing has a different atmosphere, as they already know the headline figure.

The statisticians who brief find this session particularly rewarding. They have become quite friendly with the journalists. They see it as intellectual table tennis with journalists who are expert in the subject and interested in looking beyond and behind the headlines.

Such exchanges can give the data a very human (or in this case, animal) face. Within the retail price index the price of bacon went up dramatically. Our explanation: pigs weren't breeding; the summer was too hot the year before and thousands of pigs got sunburned, which puts them off sex. The journalists were so delighted with this revelation that even the very serious *Financial Times* ran it as a separate story.

This was one of those defining moments which puts all your efforts into proper perspective!

What are the media seeking from a national statistical office? Sigma sought the views of a number of journalists around the EU. Here is what they had to say...

The media's view

Edward Roussel, Brussels Bureau Chief, Bloomberg Business News

Eight golden rules

I have identified eight "golden rules": the most important things for journalists when looking at economic statistics, and which we want to see reflected in news releases. These have been drawn up in consultation with colleagues in Germany and other EU countries and in Eastern Europe. They go something like this:

Golden rule 1: a monthly calendar

The first thing a journalist wants is a consistent, monthly calendar of events. When will economic figures be released? What time? We want to know exactly what's going to happen over the next three or four weeks. The reason is it allows us to produce better stories. In anticipation of the release of economic data we can call economists, investors etc and determine their expectations. So, when a particular figure is released, we can put it immediately into some kind of context and improve the quality of the story.

The US unemployment figures are a good example. Recently there was a big debate about whether to raise interest rates and about the pace of economic growth in the US. These figures were one of the factors. Journalists prepare for these figures for several weeks because they know exactly when they are going to be released. As a result they are able to gauge the opinion of economists about the importance of the data and their

expectations, and the minute they are released they will be instantly written up in a way that gives context and perspective, and provide clues about future economic trends.

Golden rule 2: at the same time

Journalists have to receive information at the same time. It creates a lot of tension among them and also between journalists and national statistical institutes when one group of journalists receives information before another group of journalists.

This is unfair. If a national statistical office acts in this way it is making a subjective judgement about which news organisation is more important than others. This means the NSI can be enforcing the dominant position of one news organisation and giving it a real edge. This isn't necessarily to the NSI's benefit because it is not in its interests to create a monopolistic situation in which one news organisation dominates the analysis of the data.

Equally important on the broad theme of giving information at the same time is...

Golden rule 3: avoid leaks

How to avoid leaks - information being disseminated before the official release? Again this can give an unfair advantage to one news organisation over another or to one particular investor. This



Edward Roussel. Behind him is Liette Heinen of Eurostat C5

question is regularly debated in national statistical offices. I have identified three ways to avoid leaks:

- Most economic statistics in the EU and elsewhere are still disseminated by fax. Obviously if you have just one or two fax machines then some people will receive the information before others. An easy way round this is simply to create an embargo - to state that journalists will receive the information, say, at 9am but can't release it until 10am. That puts people on the same level. However, it doesn't eliminate the possibility of leaks to the financial community or even journalists illegally making investments on the basis of such data before they are officially released.

- A way round this is to release the data electronically so that they are disseminated at exactly the same time. This is what the Bundesbank and several central banks do now, and Bloomberg is connected to most of them, receiving data in real time at the same time as our media competitors. The problem with this particular system is that it allows journalists no time to prepare a story. The data is suddenly flashed on to the screen, you have a second to analyse it before

starting to write your story, and mistakes can be made.

■ This takes me to the third - and, I think, the best - way of disseminating information in an orderly way, which, I think, both avoids leaks and also means that journalists receive the information at the same time. That is what we call the "lock-up" - as practised in the UK and the USA. Journalists quite literally are locked into a room with no access to the outside world, no telephone.

They have the release about half-an-hour in advance to analyse it and write their story intelligently with perspective and background. They can question the statisticians, clarify the figures, eliminate the possibility of mistakes. At a precise moment their story containing the figures is released to the outside world via their computers or by voice over the 'phone.

The "lock-up" is increasingly being used by data releasers. However, most do not go to the extremes of the US Department of Agriculture. For the crop production figures journalists are locked up at midnight for data released at 8-30 the following morning. A whole corridor in the department is locked up. There are armed guards and big steel doors. The journalists have all night to digest the report and prepare their stories. It sounds absolutely unbearable but it seems there have been no leaks since 1907!

Golden rule 4: clarity

This is clarity: something so simple, but people don't give a lot of thought to it - how to make a press release really clear? Best way is to have very clear tables with the latest month's figure, the previous month's figure to compare, and the same figure from the year before. You need exact percentage changes so the journalist can see instantly what's happened.

The worst case scenario is something like one Member State's unemployment figures where the

key figure is in the fifth paragraph with no comparison with the month or year before. It's extremely opaque and hard for journalists to interpret. It is also far too long - all in all, a very good example of how not to prepare a press release.

Golden rule 5: clear methodology

It is useful if all economic statistics conform to internationally recognised standards - particularly if they are released by government, when there is always the suspicion they might be trying to show the figures in a better light than is the actual case. News releases need an explanatory note spelling out the methodology. This is absolutely crucial if the methodology is being changed - for example, in the case of the new Eurostat calculation of the EU CPI - but even if it isn't journalists need to know how the figures are calculated.

Golden rule 6: up-to date-figures

The figures have to be up-to-date. The country mentioned in Rule 4 has some of the worst economic statistics in the EU. The reason why journalists and financial markets are not interested in most of them is because they are too late - they are irrelevant. Industrial production data, usually a good measure of a country's economy, are six or seven months late. By this time they are irrelevant - they might not as well release them; economists and journalists have already formed their own views of what has happened in that country's economy. Better to narrow the scope of the economic statistics you produce and make sure they come out on time.

Golden rule 7: credible figures

The figures have to be credible. People have to believe they are not being "fudged". Recently a colleague interviewed the Polish finance minister who told her that he didn't believe his own unemployment figures. Then why should journalists and the financial community?

The best way of making economic figures credible is to have an independent statistical office, because if it is part of government I am afraid the suspicion always is that pressure will be brought to bear to make figures look better. Even an independent economics statistics body is still no guarantee that people will believe the figures.

Golden rule 8: a perspective

The final rule is to put the figures into some kind of perspective - an economic number that just gives, for example, June unemployment as 15 per cent doesn't really say very much. We need some context of time - what's come before. We also like some sort of analysis of how the data slots into the overall economic picture, although I accept that this is often a sensitive area and may not be possible for many statistical agencies.

Bloomberg Business News is a global, 24-hour electronic service that offers instantaneous information on all major financial news, as well as nearly-instantaneous features that explain the background and meaning of the news.

It has 400 journalists around the world including 100 in 14 cities in Europe and the Middle East. The stories are distributed via Bloomberg's global network of 60,000 terminals, which offer a wide range of trading and analytical programmes to investors. BBN stories also run regularly in 700 newspapers that subscribe to the service.

This puts Bloomberg journalists like Edward Roussel in an ideal position to judge the relationship between a national statistical office and the news media.

This article is based on a talk by Edward Roussel to a seminar on news media relations for national statistical offices of Central and Eastern European countries, organised by Eurostat in Brussels in July (See Page 32).

Robert Chote, Economics Editor, Financial Times, London

'It's not us and them'



Robert Chote (centre) with participants on the TES course in London

The media have a very close relationship with the UK Statistical Office. It is not adversarial - not *us* against *them*. It's a cooperative exercise.

In any relationship of this sort there are always going to be occasional misunderstandings or somebody reported in a way they are not very happy with. But I see the Statistical Office as allies of the press in promoting understanding of statistics to both the general and specialist audience.

Fundamentally what the press is looking for in its relationship with a statistical agency, and in particular the press office, is at heart help in finding out and understanding what official statistics can tell us about the state of the economy and the way in which people live their lives

more broadly. Statistics are enormously important raw material for the journalists.

If you are dealing with the press it's a good point to start off by asking: *if you are confronted by a new set of economic statistics, what is news? What do we look at?*

One thing we are very interested in - most importantly - is how statistics affect people's lives. It is very difficult on occasions for statisticians and those who write about statistics a lot to get away from the long lists of numbers and tables, which we - once we know how they work - can get quite excited about. But what we as journalists have to remember is *how does it affect people's lives?*

What we need to be telling our readers - and what statistical

agencies need to be helping us to understand so we *can* tell our readers - is, for example, how a set of inflation figures matches up to people's real lives. What sort of pay increase might you need to compensate for changes in prices - not just an abstract number?

Looking for records - highest, lowest

It's much easier with numbers like unemployment - everybody understands intrinsically what they are about, a lot of people will have experienced it themselves. But with some of the numbers it's not immediately obvious. For example, in the presentation of the national accounts, it might be more difficult to explain to people why it matters to *them*.

We are also looking for records. Is this the highest rate of inflation since a given period, the biggest fall in unemployment in any single month? Is this the deepest recession? People need a sense of historical perspective in the numbers they are seeing. Presenting statistics so you have a run of historical numbers is very important.

Next question we ask is: *how does this affect policy?* What will the Government or Central Bank do in terms of policy? Will interest rates have to rise or fall? Will there be tougher action on the amount the Government borrows? Higher taxes? Or lower government spending on services like education or health? That won't come necessarily out of the numbers but statistical agencies need to be aware that these are the questions we'll ask about any sort of number.

We'll also be looking at how the financial markets are reacting.

How can the press have its job made easier in trying to do these things? What's very useful is a timetable. It is of enormous help to the media to know when a particular set of numbers is to be published. The further in advance, the greater confidence there will be in the numbers - that this is a statistical agency we can trust.

The UK Statistical Office will tell us about three or four months in advance what numbers we can expect, what time, what particular day, and how we can get hold of them. If the numbers don't come up on the day they are supposed to, there may be a very good reason; it may not necessarily be seen as a bad thing, provided there is a good explanation.

There must be consistency in the way the numbers come out. The media must be confident that the

agency, the Government, isn't trying to fool them in the way data are presented. Statistical agencies all over the world are going to be under much greater pressure to produce timetables and to be consistent with the timing and frequency of statistical releases.

Journalists are suspicious

Journalists by their nature are suspicious individuals so if you present a set of, say, inflation numbers and there are three or four different ways of calculating inflation and one of those methods mysteriously disappears from the press release, we are going to ask *why* - there must be something to hide. This may or may not be the case. All agencies and governments want to avoid suspicion, lack of trust etc. So there must always be an explanation.

Promoting longer-term understanding is important. You are statisticians - you know how these numbers work. A lot of people don't know well how they work and they need to have them explained to them, in part because if not explained to them they are going to get it wrong - write it up badly.

You are not dealing with experts - often on newspapers people will write on economic statistics for two or three years and then may go off and write about something completely different. One of my predecessors as economics editor was arts correspondent shortly beforehand.

Invite people into sessions, seminars - as in the UK - to talk to the statisticians involved in a particular set of statistics and just explain to them how it works. Produce handbooks or a short description. It all helps to prevent misunderstandings.

Be open on revisions. If you have to revise the figures then don't hide it

and wait for somebody to discover it by accident. People will say "You tried to hide that from us; how can we trust the rest of your numbers?" It's important to be "up-front".

On practicalities, it is very helpful to allow access to the people who put together the numbers - for journalists to be able to ring up the person responsible. However good a press office is, it helps to build trust in a statistical agency if you allow this. The press office can be kept informed and the statistician perhaps not quoted by name.

The press are also writing about what has been going on longer term in a particular sector. It is helpful to have a press officer who knows the full sweep of statistics the office produces. And how they might fit in with statistics produced by other bodies eg employers' organisations or research institutes.

The key message

My key message is:

- The same word comes up again and again - confidence. Everything a statistical agency does must be aimed at establishing media and public confidence.

- Statistics should always be presented on the assumption that you are not dealing with a specialist audience. Your main concern should be what's going to get through to the general public as a broad mass.

.....
The above is a summary of an address given by Mr Chote to a Training for European Statisticians course on news media relations. It was organised in London in February this year for 24 people involved in dissemination in the national statistical offices of around a dozen Central and Eastern European countries. See report on Page 32.

Klaus Brune, Chief Editor, Fokus Deutschland

Hard-hitting words or a jumble of figures

"Numbers make the world go round." For news services in the financial world the daily routine is definitely shaped by figures published by statistical offices. Markets - in foreign currencies, pensions and shares - spend half their time waiting for the latest news on unemployment, inflation or trends in the short-term economy, and the other half reacting to newly-published figures.

In a sense statistics deserve this attention. For statisticians make it their business to transform subtle and thus barely perceptible changes in society into quantifiable parameters. Whether these changes concern unemployment, which would otherwise be a painful first-hand experience or witnessed indirectly via acquaintances or neighbours, or inflation and its constant squeeze on the wallet, statistics always provide us with concrete evidence that something has changed.

For financial journalists, the men and women at the interface

between words and figures, this fixation with figures is often a painful corollary of the "digital age". Gone are the days, apparently, when rhetoric and grammar were on an equal footing with mathematics. The market is now deaf to the magic of words - though an increase from 0.1% to 0.2% seems to make all the difference in the world.

For the editor of the printed media, however, something of the former power of the word remains. Ultimately, the subtle trends revealed by statistics can be set down on paper which endures - indeed, this can be done elegantly and articulately. Things are not quite so easy for the editor working on the news desk or for a news service. As soon as the fax springs into life, the whole office becomes a whirl of activity, with people rushing to get the information from the fax before the ink has even dried. What a blessing the "embargo" is. The very mention of the word has

Klaus Brune (32) is Chief Editor of Fokus Deutschland, the German-language news and analysis service provided by Dow Jones Telerate.

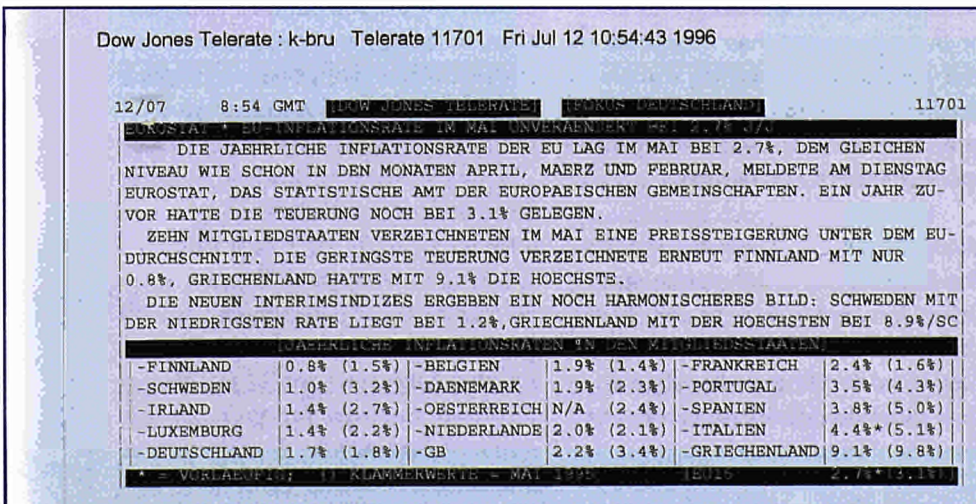
Dow Jones Telerate is a leading supplier of real-time electronic financial data and services. Over 100,000 terminals in 80 countries worldwide are connected to the company's network. Customers - primarily banks, but also insurance companies and industrial and commercial firms - receive real-time data on stock prices, news, analysis and expert opinions on all the world's financial markets and stock exchanges.

Dow Jones Telerate is a division of Dow Jones & Company Inc, publisher of the Wall Street Journal and the Dow Jones Index for the leading US industrial shares. In 1995 the company recorded a turnover of US\$ 2.3 billion.

a calming, sobering effect - at least until the embargo runs out.

But speed is of the essence, as every embargo is finite. And therein lies a wondrous paradox. For professional statisticians, even the unquestioning disciples of arithmetic, enlist the help of words to hide the figures they have so painstakingly revealed behind lofty mountains of words. "A good thing or a bad thing?" is often the anxious question as the editor hurriedly glances at press releases to find the figures behind the text.

It seems that the interplay between number-crunchers and wordsmiths is bound to continue. There may never be a "perfect" press release: a release that sets apposite words against bare figures with no mutual cover-up. But a press release that brings together telling statistics and explanatory text under a hard-hitting headline would, in the end, benefit both sides.



This is how Dow Jones Telerate transmits Eurostat data

Laszlo Trankovits, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa)

Figures without explanation annoy the press

Laszlo Trankovits works for the renowned German press agency dpa – Deutsche Presse-Agentur. Each day, innumerable statistical releases land on his desk. Here he describes the lesson he's learned.

An ever-swelling tide of data is flooding the industrialised countries. This flood is felt most keenly by editorial departments in the media. Editorial staff are increasingly called on in the course of their every day work to make an ever more complex world transparent and intelligible. Figures and statistics play a key role.

Like other media, dpa takes this in its stride by processing statistics and data from the most diverse sources on a daily basis before releasing them through its branch offices. Its subsidiary, Globus, is responsible for graphics.

Condensed information

Statistical material is crucial to media coverage in the economic field. Figures such as the rate of inflation or GDP are the concentrated product of millions of economic decisions and process-

es. These extremely significant base data become fully intelligible only when converted into time series.

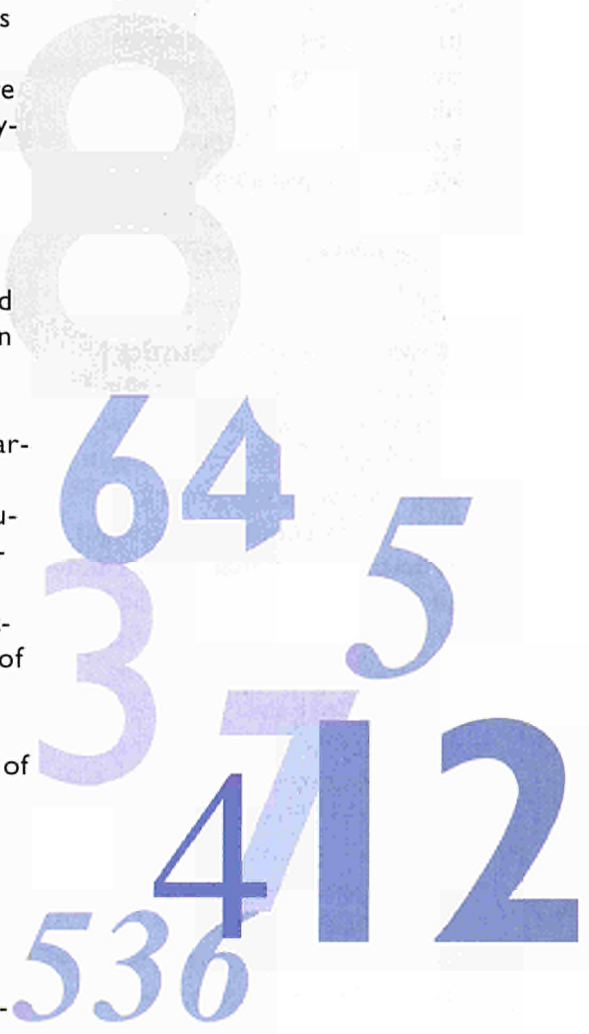
Statistics are only as good as their presentation. One thing that dpa and its branch offices have in common with the other media is that it almost never supplies mere sets of raw figures. As a rule, statistical results are presented in a readily intelligible form. For the every day work of the journalist this means that unannotated figures from institutions, associations, enterprises or governments are a source of considerable annoyance for editorial staff.

A shining example

The statistical material supplied by the Deutsche Bundesbank in Frankfurt is exemplary. Rather than supply just bare figures, it establishes relationships and carries out evaluations. Although national or international institutions are understandably reluctant to be drawn into political conflict as a result of interpreting figures, the traditional way of providing statistics is the bugbear of many a journalist. The serious and sober preparation of data prior to their release is crucial to the routine work of an agency.

Anyone who has ever lost his credibility when preparing figures by making foolhardy inter-

pretations, indulging in confusing number games or attempting cover-ups, will find it very difficult to regain the confidence of editorial staff. Which is why the wish for suitably processed material must be tempered by a desire to produce text that is as objective, sound and unpartisan as possible, priority being given to succinctness and judicious evaluation. The quantity of data virtually never determines the quality of statistics – it is almost always the type of presentation.



Gerd Zitzelsberger is Chief Editor of the highly-regarded Süddeutsche Zeitung, Germany's most popular quality daily. He is also project manager for the SZ-Finanz, published jointly by the Süddeutsche Zeitung and the London Financial Times. Here he takes a critical look at statistics in general and European statistics in particular from the point-of-view of a journalist.

Gerd Zitzelsberger, Süddeutsche Zeitung

Statisticians need courage of their convictions

European statistics still feature a number of yawning gaps, many of which suit politicians perfectly.

"Statistics are like bikinis – they give tantalizing glimpses but cover up all that matters." Gone are the days when professors had to hold their students' attention in the lecture hall with such aphorisms. Gone, too, are the days when the mention of statistics made managers think of dusty shelves, figures on live-born pigs or incubated eggs for hatching (figures that did and do still exist in Germany) before turning to more pressing matters with a wry smile.

Nowadays, official statistics sometimes cause such a stir that statisticians themselves take fright. When, at the beginning of March, the American authorities reported a growth in employment that far exceeded expectations, capital market interest rates rocketed within minutes and 30-year bonds instantly lost over three per cent of their value (see graph). However, even if we ignore such spectacular incidents, the need for – and impact of – statistics is incomparably greater today than some 10 years ago. Industry now employs hordes of marketing experts, portfolio

managers and share analysts to evaluate and interpret columns of figures. There are no statistics to show, for example, whether this has increased the reliability of enterprises' production plans. The sole advantage, detractors would have us believe, is that wrong forecasts are better substantiated. But a rough guide is better than no guide at all.

Theory and practice

Export-oriented countries such as the Federal Republic need reliable data not just from their own country, but also from other countries. In theory, German enterprises can, of course, contact the statistical authorities in Athens or Lisbon direct ("what was their name again?"), but in practice this is not an option, even for SMEs. And the data on other countries that can be obtained via the national statistical authorities – in Germany via the Statistisches Bundesamt's CD-ROM – are often not sufficiently up-to-date.

Supplying figures for the entire EU promptly and inexpensively

may be the most obvious aim of European statisticians in Luxembourg, but it is certainly not the only one. It is particularly important for users of statistics that figures are meaningful and do not contain any pitfalls. It is, for example, quite unacceptable that one country counts stock exchange turnover once only, while another doubles it and a third – Germany – multiplies it by a factor of around 2.3. One really important job for the European statistical authorities would be to provide a clear indication – at repeated intervals, if necessary – that figures have been touched up in this way. They must be the citizen's guarantor of statistical comparability. And if statisticians stop to think about what they or their colleagues in other institutions are in fact measuring, they might also revise their concepts. It may sometimes be necessary to provide an exact gloss of a concept in an explanatory note. But time series on "motor vehicles with self-ignition" and those with "external ignition" – ie cars with diesel engines and cars with petrol engines – are reminiscent of the time when doctors spoke

Latin to ensure that they were not understood by the *hoi polloi*. Similarly, statistics on "digital processing equipment", "digital processing units" and "input or output units" are not worth enumerating, as these concepts have long since become redundant in the field of EDP. However commendable their efforts to achieve diachronic comparability, statisticians must remain flexible enough to be able to provide a more or less meaningful classification of the output of a country's economy or that of an economic area.

Establishing priorities

Considerable headway has, however, been made in another field: statisticians have learnt by now that even the most accurate figures will be consigned to the wastepaper basket if they relate to events in the dim and distant past. Nowadays, statistics tread the admittedly fine line between obsolescence and estimation (with all its associated problems) much more boldly than before. With supra-national statistics in particular, we cannot wait for the last straggler to deliver his figures. And for the pan-European growth rate, for example, it is no great consequence if Portugal's domestic product increases by half-a-percent or so - for the simple reason that Portugal is too small to distort the growth rate for the EU as a whole. The reward for having the courage to produce topical figures - which may have to be revised subsequently - lies not least in the political sphere: statistics for the EU as a whole have recently become much more "interesting". And this makes people

think in European terms. If the EU countries had been able to agree on this strategy at an earlier point in time, Europe would be rooted much more firmly in people's minds.

The next few years will show whether European statisticians can likewise find the courage to publish, for example, figures on Europe's productive capacity or the distribution of income and wealth. This requires courage, as data such as these can by definition always be contested from a methodological point of view, not least because of the lack of primary data in individual countries. And droves of graduates writing their dissertations or doctoral theses will doubtless pull such figures to pieces. But, for all its inaccuracy and uncer-

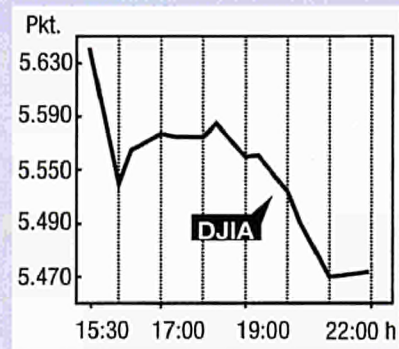
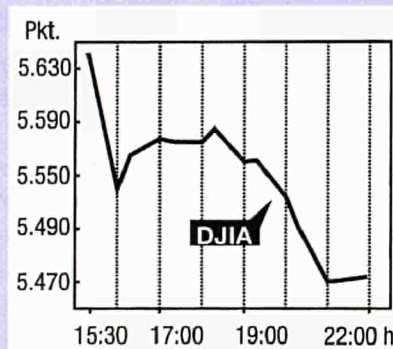
tainty, judicious evaluation is worth more than scientifically unassailable silence.

Heedless of political sensitivities

There is one other field that is more sensitive, but no less important, for supra-national statistical authorities. There is an impression that national governments are not unreservedly enthusiastic about all types of figures appearing in the media. For example, it is not easy to obtain official and up-to-date information on foreign capital that is held in tax havens. Tax avoidance of this type has become a serious problem for Europe as a whole. Government statisticians, forever claiming to be "objective, neutral and scientifically independent", still spend more time accurately recording incubated eggs for hatching.

Statistics can rock the financial markets

Thirty-year government bonds and the Dow Jones Index following the announcement of a surprisingly high growth in employment. Source: SZ-FINANZ



Statistics sometimes burst like a bombshell. When on 8 March the US Ministry of Labor reported a surprisingly high increase in employment, stocks on Wall Street fell by 3% before the close of trading. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the main indicator of the New York shares market, slumped by 217 points or 3.8% (see graph), while 30-year government bonds tumbled by over three percentage points. Bond markets were last rocked in this way in August 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and the UN imposed trade sanctions.

Peter Håkansson, Sveriges Television

Statistics on TV – is there any point?

Rapport

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Peter Håkansson is an economist who works as a researcher for Rapport on Swedish TV. His job is to seek out statistics and facts in order to compile features and provide reporters with background information. He used to work for the National Swedish Audit Bureau.

Rapport is Sweden's largest TV news programme with 11 broadcasts each day. Its evening edition has an audience of around two million every weekday.

Presenting statistics on television is no easy task. It might seem impossible to make a good TV programme out of statistics but they do have many advantages. Proper statistics can add new knowledge and insights to an issue that may seem familiar or already settled.

"A police force with 100 years of experience has fallen apart in no time at all. Nowadays we investigate shoplifting and homicides but neglect the everyday crimes between these two extremes."

These were the words of two former chiefs of police that appeared in the Sunday 9 July edition of *Dagens Nyheter* and caused quite a splash in the Swedish media.

By Monday the news was already a day old and no longer could be regarded as particularly fresh. Nevertheless, *Rapport* wanted to follow up the story, preferably by drawing international comparisons. With the aid of statistics provided by Interpol, our main evening broadcast presented a "league table" of the crime-solving abilities of different countries (see table). In this way, we were able to give a different angle to the problem and contribute to the debate on police work. The following day, an evening paper also published the *Rapport* findings alongside an article on international comparisons. As you can see, the list did not exactly flatter the Swedish police!

Statistics news features

Comparative statistics, opinion polls, voting surveys and election statistics are statistics used most often in TV news programmes. However, most statistics used by the *Rapport* editorial team are not presented on screen as such but used as background in developing a story and helping the reporter to get to grips quickly with a specific problem.

One difficulty with presenting statistics on TV is that tables and figures can't be kept on screen too long. So only a small amount of data can be shown at one time, and figures and diagrams have to be kept very clear and simple.

On TV therefore we often give data a "human face" by using case studies. Presenting statistics clearly on screen tends to be easier if real people are depicted. But this can, however, also be a problem in certain circumstances. If *Rapport* presents a case study of one person's problem, this does not mean necessarily this is a problem for the whole of society. And even though we try not to draw far-reaching conclusions from such case studies, we are still influencing the viewer's picture of reality. It is here that statistics can help enormously by putting the problem in context. Statistics can show whether one person's problem is a general one, a social problem or simply a marginal phenomenon. With the help of statistics, the viewer can discover how many people suffer from the same problems and thus can draw comparisons.

PERCENTAGE OF CRIMES SOLVED 1993

Japan	72.6
Ireland	29.1
Norway	22.09
Luxembourg	19.24
Greece	17.6
Austria	17.3
Canada	16.92
USA	13.1
Germany	12.5
France	12.22
Portugal	11.1
Spain	10.57
Denmark	10.4
Netherlands	10
Sweden	8
Belgium	7

Increasingly official statistics are presented to the public via television or newspapers in simple pictures or news graphics. It seems an unstoppable trend. National and international graphics agencies are filling this demand by packaging statistical data for the media market.

What kind of "product" do these agencies want? And what is the place of statistics generally? DR ANDREAS BIRKEN from Globus-Kartendienst in Hamburg offers an answer.

Coping with a dry flood

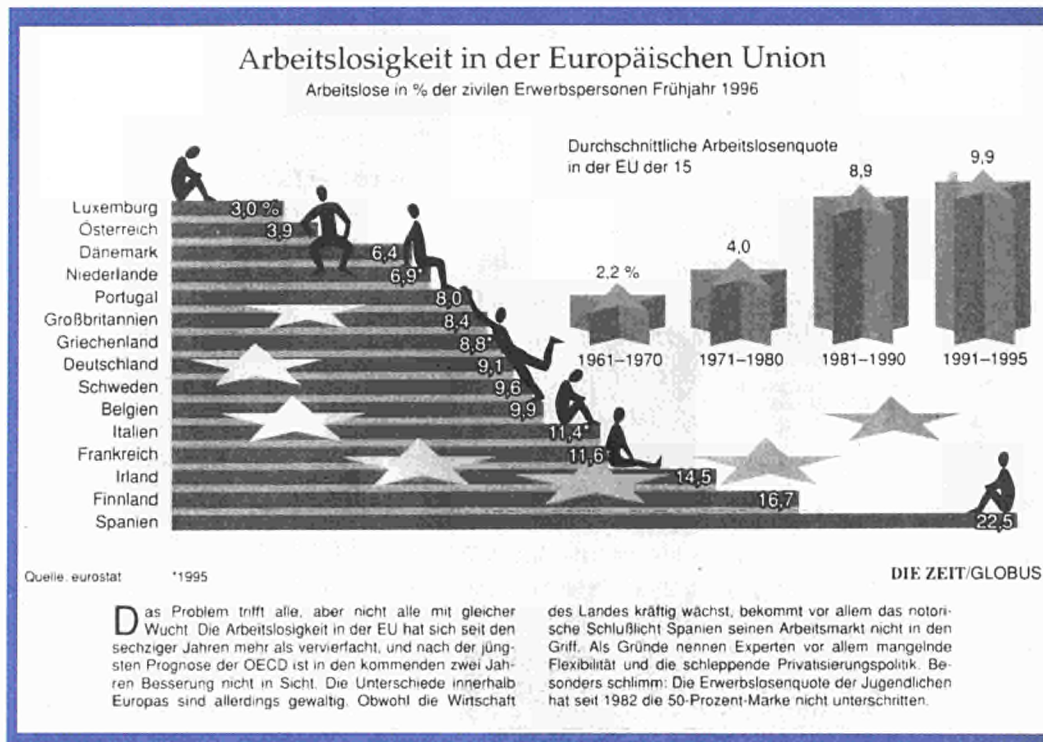
Dr Birken (54) has been a managing director of Globus-Kartendienst GmbH since 1983. Globus celebrated its 50th anniversary this summer. Each year it produces some 2,500 graphics. These are sent out to customers via electronic mail, satellite or post.

Statistics are commonly believed to be dry, impenetrable - and often wrong to boot. Globus-Kartendienst sees its job as dispelling this preconception.

Statistics are mostly dry and impenetrable if presented in tabular form. Diagrams are often vain attempts to lump together a profusion of figures. This is where statistical graphics come in - they give a visual dimension to figures and allow values to be compared.

A good graphic features the following:

- a judicious choice of key data
- representation that neither distorts nor misinterprets the figures
- attractive presentation that draws the reader into the subject matter.



An example of the work of Globus Kartendienst and how it is used in the press

Accurate, reliable and up-to-date graphics depend on the use of reliable sources. Globus-Kartendienst thus works with original sources only. Unfortunately, published statistics are not always completely up-to-date. A topical press service thus relies on advance information from its data suppliers, and must often 'phone to check whether more recent figures are not lying around on experts' desks.

International comparisons pose a particular problem. There are two reasons for this:

Firstly, different countries often work with different definitions, which means that figures are not directly comparable. Harmonised statistics from international organisations are thus of incalculable value.

Secondly, statisticians in different countries work at different speeds. This either means that comparisons must be made using data from different years, or that all figures are years out of date - neither of which is terribly satisfactory from the reader's point of view.

Two seminars for Central & Eastern European countries

On course for good press relations!

by John Wright

This year has seen two seminars - one run by the organisation Training of European Statisticians (TES), the other by Eurostat - aimed at demonstrating EU "best practice" in the art of news media relations to national statistical institutes of Central and Eastern European countries.

TES in London

Twenty-five people from NSIs in these countries attended a week-long course on presenting official statistics to news media and public in London in February. It was run under the auspices of the Luxembourg-based organisation Training of European Statisticians, which is sponsored by Eurostat, and with the assistance of the UK Central Statistical Office. Course director was John Wright, news media consultant to Eurostat and formerly

head of information at the CSO in London. He is also editorial adviser to and writes for Sigma.

A dozen Central and Eastern European countries were represented, mostly by staff working in the dissemination field. The course followed a highly-successful first one of its kind, mainly for people from statistical offices of EU Member States, also in London, last September.

One of the key presentations was by Robert Chote, Economics Editor of the *Financial Times* (see article on Page 24). He told the course that the UK press had a very close and cooperative relationship with the Central Statistical Office. "What I am looking for as a journalist is help in finding out and understanding what official statistics can tell me about the state of the economy and how people run their lives."

A core element of the course was the skill of identifying from the mass of data generated by statistical offices those items likely to attract media and public interest. And then presenting them in *the right way, to the right people at the right time - and monitoring the resulting publicity to give all-important feedback to those who had produced the data in the first place.*

The course was given training in producing plans for news media coverage and writing all-important news releases to capture media attention. Much of the instruction was based on the highly-successful press service developed over the last three years for Eurostat.

The course visited the UK CSO to see how their news media relations are operated, releasing key economic data on the split second to the London and world financial markets.

They were shown how the major international financial news agencies keep their communications equipment permanently installed in the CSO press office for instant transmission worldwide (see article on Page 19).

They also visited one of the agencies - Bloomberg Business News in the City of London - where Mr Robin Simpson, a news executive, told them:

We are interested in carrying your national data on our service. There is no requirement on our behalf other than a regular and reliable flow of information.

Mr Simpson said the US in particular was keen to invest in Central and Eastern Europe but did require transparency in the field of economic statistics.

Several course members made on-the-spot preliminary arrangements to have their data transmitted by Bloomberg, thus giving them access to worldwide coverage on the organisation's tens of thousands of screens in the United States, Europe and the Far East.

Some of the transition countries already have "pages" on the Bloomberg service. For example, during the visit the Hungarians were able to discover the name of the their newly-appointed Finance Minister, announced that day. The Czechs were able to see an extensive range of their statistical data on screen.

Countries represented on the course were: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Macedonia.

The next TES course on this topic is planned for February 1997.

More of the same

Participants from the same range of countries attended a two-day seminar on news media relations for NSIs held in the Commission Headquarters in Brussels in July, and organised by the



At Bloomberg Business News - watching the television service in operation



Participants in the Brussels seminar visit Bloomberg Business News

international relations directorate of Eurostat. The course director was again John Wright. Nearly a third of the 25 participants had been on the TES course in London described on the previous page. Some of the delegates brought along journalists with whom they are in regular contact and they gave the discussion an extra dimension.

One important objective was to try and encourage the participation of delegates. This was achieved to a significant extent with a high level of intervention from the floor and discussion of the topics raised by speakers.

The first morning was devoted to discussion of the essential role of the news media in cementing the position of a national statistical office within a democratic system. There seemed to be an acute awareness of the issues involved in this key area.

Hard on the heels of this came a visit to the daily briefing by the Spokesman Service of the Commission which is attended by some 300-400 international news media. This was a particularly full briefing and it served at a stroke to emphasise the pivotal role played by the Commission Spokesman generally and specifically in regard to the dissemination of European statistics. Many of the participants clearly found this experience of considerable fascination and value.

This was reinforced in the afternoon by a talk by Patrick Child, Spokesman for Commissioner de Silguy, on how the EC handles the news media.

Another speaker was Mike Finn, Senior Press Officer of the UK Office for National Statistics (see article on Page 19).

A focus for the seminar was provided by the book *Statistics in the news*. This guide to news media relations for NSIs of countries in transition, written by John Wright and being published by Eurostat, was provided. It was extremely well received by participants many of whom said they would find it extremely valuable in developing their ideas further in this field and in training staff. (See article on Page 10).

A highlight of the second day was a talk by Edward Roussel, head of the Brussels bureau of Bloomberg Business News. This gave participants a valuable insight into the needs of the "customer" ie the journalist and more pointers to how they might use Bloomberg and other Western news agencies more in developing their outlets to the international news media. (See article on Page 22).

In the afternoon Mr Roussel's talk was followed by a visit to his offices in the International Press Centre to see how Bloomberg's worldwide on-screen service operates and how the

Brussels operation dovetails into it. Several participants were able to call up data pages on their own countries on to the screen and the visit was given added interest by the announcement - instantaneously relayed on screen from the US at 2-30 - of the highly-newsworthy US unemployment figures.

A final session, chaired by Mr P Amor of Eurostat Unit C5 was devoted to how the seminar might be followed up by a publicity initiative involving the CEECs and Eurostat and using the facilities of the Spokesman Service.

Another development from the course was the request by several delegates for Mr Wright and Mr Finn to visit their countries to make similar presentations. In the case of Latvia the newspaper editor who attended the seminar said would like to organise such a seminar for the journalists on his staff as well as representatives of the NSI.

Overall the sessions in London and Brussels demonstrated the high degree of interest in this topic among Central and Eastern European countries and the keen demand for training and discussion on "best practice". It is expected that there will be a strong follow-up by Eurostat.



In the London course training room. Standing (foreground) are Course Director John Wright (left) and lecturer George Cunningham (right), a UK press relations expert

The latest in our profiles of national statistical offices — France and...

50 years of INSEE

A mission to tell the truth

"But what do you think your mission is?" the French Minister of Finance one day abruptly asked Francis-Louis Closon, Director-General of INSEE at the time. This was in the 50s and they were discussing fundamental questions about the role and responsibilities of the institution.

It is a question that politicians the world over never stop asking NSIs. Closon proudly answered, "To tell the truth!"

The following pages, tracing 50 years of INSEE's history, tell of a never-ending battle for free statistics, independent, honest, accessible to all.

In May there was a perfectly orchestrated celebration, in front of a very large public, to mark the 50th anniversary. It was held in Paris and in each of the 24 French regions where INSEE has an office. It honoured an institution particularly proud of being able to bring together for the event the six Director-Generals – all still hale and hearty – who had steered its destiny since 1946.

There were lessons to be learned by everyone involved in the celebration: simplicity, tenacity; a constant effort to improve by creating a better understanding of events.

In his opening speech, Mr Jean Arthuis, the present Minister of



Economy and Finance, declared: "By conviction, as much as by personal experience, I share values in common with the statisticians and the national accountants that you are or have been. In particular, I am of the opinion that transparency, sincerity and accuracy of accounts, be they public or private, are a prerequisite of the well functioning of state and business. I shall even go further: in

order to work properly, democracy requires trustworthy and impartial economic and social information."

Mr Closon, in his speech, described how the early post-war years had first been marked by the dominance of words: figures were embarrassing. INSEE's history has been one in which this dominance has been reversed: figures now count!

The French National Statistical Institute differs from most of its counterparts in other countries by virtue of its twofold role: study and research and production of data. A regional presence, study potential, international cooperation and top-quality research departments and organisation have helped INSEE achieve its success.

A job well done

by Antoine Bussy

The 6,500 INSEE staff this year celebrate the 50th anniversary of their institute's foundation. As its name indicates, the particular role of the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies is to study economic and social circumstances in France alongside the more traditional statistical work.

INSEE's primary task is to collect raw data needed for its statistical output and studies. To acquire these, it uses administrative sources and conducts special field surveys. In support of this work, INSEE has two massive comprehensive national registers for registration and identification: the Sirène Register of Enterprises and the Register of Natural Persons. These statistical behemoths are updated daily by two teams of about 10 officials at the National Data Processing centre in Nantes, in liaison with 24 INSEE regional offices across France. The latter are regularly involved in the three annual national surveys. It is perhaps symptomatic of the times that the March employment survey (involving about 100,000 households) is better known by the general public than surveys covering living conditions and rents. The regional offices are also involved in more specific work, such as recent surveys on residential mobility, health and transport. They are also responsible for recording prices, a job that involves about 300 staff. Each month they record more than



Urban archives at INSEE in Rennes

150,000 prices at about 3,000 points of sale in a 100 or so conurbations.

Keeping track of the French economy

Using raw data that investigators collect from households and enterprises, INSEE has to compile most

of the indices that chart the economic life of the nation: consumer prices, production prices, industrial output, building costs and growth rates... These vital indicators are published to a timetable fixed three months in advance in "rapid information" pamphlets containing the raw figures, usually with short notes.



Jean Arthuis (right), Minister of Economy and Finance, and Paul Champsaur at the opening of the exhibition "50 years of INSEE"

Getting behind the raw data

Apart from producing statistical data, INSEE also carries out studies of the structural and short-term pattern of social and economic trends in France. *INSEE Première* is a four-page bulletin (several issues a week) outlining the analyses and commenting on major social and economic phenomena. Recent issues have included a report on retired people and their situation at 60 and 80 years of age. *INSEE Résultats*

(50 times a year) provides detailed figures on population, the production system, incomes and standard of living. Another regular publication, *Economie et Statistique*, provides more detailed analyses.

INSEE has also presented the National Accounts to the Committee on the Accounts for the Nation every year since the early 1960s. In this same area of macroeconomic analysis, the institute uses its knowledge of the basic data to produce very short-term forecasts (six months). This

is done entirely independently by the department responsible for monitoring short-term trends and reflects solely the institute's interpretation. With the trend towards decentralisation and as concerns over environmental planning have grown, INSEE has expanded its regional study resources. Such analyses serve to make the most of the institute's raw material, even though it has no monopoly in this area.

Better dissemination

But there would be no point of "value-added" data without INSEE's third main task: to make sure all its work reaches economic leaders and the press, and through them the general public. The fact that some of its publications are veritable best-sellers among books on the economy underlines its success in this task. Examples are *La France et ses régions*, *Tableaux de l'économie française* and, to a lesser extent, *Annuaire statistique de la France*, also available on CD-ROM. The Sirène Register of Enterprises also earns money, with more than three million consultations via the Minitel network every year. Since the end of the 1960s, when an "economic observatory" was set up in each of the regional capitals, the regional offices have dealt with local user requests. These numbered 500,000 in 1995. For the general public who want information on the official indices, INSEE has established a telephone information service (36 68 07 60) or Minitel (3615 INSEE), as well as a service geared to more professional inquiries (3617 PVI). Each regional office also has a reading room with all of INSEE publications, and for several years the institute has been developing a network of centres to relay information to chambers of commerce, local libraries etc.

Statistical coordination

In addition to its three main tasks familiar to the general public, INSEE is also responsible for coordinating – primarily technical and legally – the work of various public bodies involved in compiling statistics in France. For social and economic statistics, the country has opted for decentralisation by subject. This is surprising in a country so traditionally centralist as France. The result is that most Ministries have their own statistical departments. To avoid duplication, as well as ensuring no areas are missed, INSEE with 70% of official statisticians in France, coordinates all statistical work. The basis for this is the Law of 7 June 1951 which created inter-ministerial bodies and provided for INSEE experts to be seconded. Against this background classifications are discussed and compiled. A team of about 20 people is in charge of this work at INSEE. This makes it an ideal partner in collaborating with Eurostat and helping to construct genuine Community statistics.

An international NSI

Another INSEE task is international cooperation. This is geared both to developing countries and to those switching to a market economy. Cooperation currently takes two forms. The traditional bilateral cooperation that France has pursued since the 1960s is being replaced by a new form of cooperation under European aegis. Three-quarters of INSEE's work in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are funded by the EU. Main beneficiaries are Poland, Rumania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where INSEE is helping to set up business registers and national accounts. It is also working in the same European context with the Maghreb countries and Lebanon.



United – the six Directors-General of INSEE. From left to right: Jean-Claude Milleron (1987-1992), Edmond Malinvaud (1974-1987), Francis-Louis Closos (1946-1961), Jean Ripert (1967-1974), Claude Gruson (1961-1967) and Paul Champsaur, since 1992

INSEE celebrates

INSEE's 50th anniversary has not gone unnoticed. It has been marked by a commemorative meeting and several special publications. On 2 May the meeting at the Pavillon Baltard in Paris bringing together Paul Champsaur and his five predecessors as Directors-General was attended by Jean Arthuis, Minister for Economic and Financial Affairs. More than 1,800 officials and ex-officials of the Finance Directorate also attended the event, with each receiving a book outlining major events in INSEE's history since it was set up at the end of the war. A similar event was organised on the same day in every city with a regional office. In all, about 10,000 current or retired officials attended these celebrations arranged by the International Communication Service set up in 1992.

INSEE also used the occasion to publish a series of retrospective studies on the pattern of economic and social development in France between 1946 and 1996. About 30 topics are being dealt with during the year in the INSEE Première series, covering population, employment, incomes and household consumption and patterns of living.

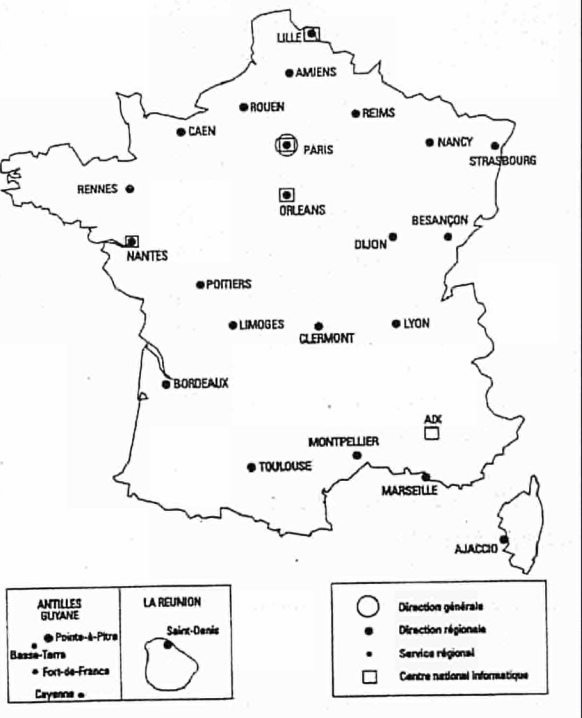
Bilateral cooperation is mainly in Africa, where some 30 French statisticians (including about 10 from INSEE) are currently stationed. In particular, the institute helped the 14 countries of the franc zone to set up Afristat, a supra-national statistical body along the lines of Eurostat, formally inaugurated in Bamako, Mali, at the end of last year. Other cooperation has taken place in Latin America and, since 1995, in China. INSEE also exchanges officials with other statis-

tical bodies, especially the Canadians, and second staff to the United Nations (two officials), the IMF (six) and, of course, Eurostat, where there are about half-a-dozen.

Training and research

Finally, INSEE definitely looks to the future, through teaching its skills in the national schools of economics and statistics linked to the institute. It has a scientific research unit called

IMPLANTATION DES ÉTABLISSEMENTS DE L'INSEE



Location of INSEE's 24 regional directorates and five data-processing centres

CREST (Centre de recherche en économie et statistique) where about 40 doctoral candidates and 30 qualified research workers are responsible for publishing *Les annales d'économie et statistique* and *Econometrica*. Further training is provided by CEPE (Centre d'études des programmes économiques), which last year admitted some 600 students. To train its career officials initially, INSEE has created two large training centres. These accommodate, in addition to about 100 officials from the institute, 500 residential students from banks, insurance, industry, services etc, lending their knowledge of the market economy.

The first of these establishments is ENSAE (Ecole nationale de la statistique et de l'administration économique), which trains INSEE

administrative grades in conceptual, study and research work. Mathematical statistics, economics and finance are the main areas of study. The second school is ENSAI (Ecole nationale de la statistique et de l'analyse de l'information), which trains students for future work in these fields. At the start of the current academic year ENSAI students will be instructed in statistical techniques, information processing and general economics at new premises in Rennes. Another innovation scheduled for September was the opening of the INSEE Comptroller Training School in Libourne. The curriculum has been completely overhauled and tuition hours will practically double over the six months of training – to 620 hours. All these efforts devoted to training should mean INSEE celebrating its 100th anniversary with an even greater reputation and even more highly-qualified staff.

INSEE in 1996

The French National Statistical Institute employs about 6,500 officials at some 30 locations:

- 1,500 at the two buildings of the Directorate-General at Malakoff, close to the Paris ring road
- 4,500 at the 24 offices in each of France's 22 urban regions, plus the offices in Réunion and an inter-regional one at Pointe-à-Pitre (which covers French possessions in the Caribbean and South America)
- more than 500 at the five national data processing centres in Aix-en-Provence, Lille (management and demographics), Orléans (census), Nantes (business statistics) and Paris (living conditions).

FACTS AND FIGURES

Population census

This work, essential for implementing various laws and statutes, is carried out at regular intervals, the last in 1990. It was the 32nd census in France since the first in 1801. The census has two main purposes:

-to count the "legal population" of each administrative division (municipalities, cantons, districts, departments and regions) and of France as a whole,

-to compile basic population statistics, primarily on employment and housing.

The census is conducted throughout France by INSEE officials in conjunction with the municipalities. The next census of population, households and housing is scheduled for 1999.

Statistical secrecy

Introduced by the Law of 7 June 1951, statistical secrecy forbids communication to anyone of individual information culled from statistical surveys or administrative records. This safeguarding of individual freedom was reinforced by the Law of 6 January 1978 on data processing and freedom. Any computerised processing, involving the census, statistical surveys or use of administrative sources, must be sanctioned by a regulation following consideration by the Committee on Data Processing and Freedoms.

The good old days!

Francis-Louis Closon, Director-General of INSEE 1946-61

A senator wrote to me at the time of the census. He made a special point of not filling in his census form. You may well laugh, but that reaction revealed disregard for a citizen's duty and a rather odd attitude.

Another example of the good old days was the behaviour of a Minister for Agriculture during an agricultural census, who tackled me with the words: "You are going to cause problems for me with the farmers, what with your agricultural census". And of course it was a poor census.

Another time, when we were carrying out a census at various places in Paris on behalf of the Ministry of National Education, a secretary of state told me: "Your questions are going to cause me no end of bother with my local concierges!"

One day, I was summoned to the office of the Minister for Finance, who wasted no time in telling me: "We have to save money. You are going to get rid of all these questionnaires you keep sending every three months to company bosses to find out what they think about unemployment, prices, foreign trade. That's an order." I couldn't understand this sudden whim, but the order was of course carried out for the lifetime of that government, and then rescinded when the next government took over. About the same time, I got a letter from the managing director of a fairly large firm: "It's obvious that you don't have much to do and in order to justify your salary you keep asking company bosses silly questions". Fortune magazine in the United States was asking the same questions, and the company heads they consulted felt that it was something of an honour.

Lessons to be learned

Mr Paul Champsaur, present Director-General

It is possible to learn a few things from what has been done in France and elsewhere.

First of all, there is a general similarity in the job assigned to official statistics in countries like France. In a democratic society, where the circulation of information of every kind has attained the importance we all know, it is impossible to disassociate the service provided by official statistics to the authorities from the service it offers the whole of society. The quality and credibility of statistical information represent a public good in both the moral and the economic sense.

In order to be relevant and understood, official statistics need to be a proper part of the State and society. This is achieved with procedures which vary tremendously from country to country.

The cultural climate has developed to the benefit of statistics: our citizens are better educated, there is more and better coverage in the media of economic and social phenomena, and the importance of statistical information compiled on a scientific basis is acknowledged to an ever increasing degree. Among all the factors affecting the cultural climate, we must not forget the long-standing practice of the Ministry of Economic Affairs - to which INSEE has belonged since its creation - whereby there is strict separation of the technical preparation of a matter and any political decision. This tradition clearly encourages statisticians' professional independence and fosters high-quality statistics, which are a prerequisite for objective analysis.



Jean Arthuis (right) meets first Director-General Francis-Louis Closon at INSEE's 50th celebration

Unbiased and reliable information

Mr Jean Arthuis, Minister for Economic Affairs

What should be the role of a statistical institute? It needs to provide everyone in the country with up-to-date, unbiased and reliable information on the state of society and the economy:

- government departments, of course, who have a vital need for this information in formulating policy
- firms, which increasingly need rapid knowledge of economic trends, which have become more cyclical and global
- all those who ponder the future of our society or who are interested in how it is changing - those who want to close gaps in society, and, of course, the people of the country. Information, whether it relates to the economy, social circumstances or any other field, is essential for the proper operation of democracy. Thanks to extensive and credible information, people can focus on the real issues, and this helps to combat prejudice and ensure serious discussion.

(From speeches delivered on the 50th anniversary of INSEE)

Saying it with figures

by Antoine Bussy

There have been six Directors-General at INSEE since it was founded in 1946. Using their periods of office to tell the story of the last half century is not only practical but proper, in the sense that each of them moved the institute forward.

The *Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques* (INSEE) has now been refuting for 50 years the claim by the Goncourt brothers at the end of the last century that statistics is the "foremost inexact science". These 50 years have seen INSEE become a respected institution. But, in the words of Béatrice Touchelay, this recognition came only after a "lengthy battle of figures". When INSEE was set up under the financial law of 26 April 1946, it was an ambitious venture. It was, of course, needed by a France in the throes of planning and nationalising

to rebuild the country, but the cumbersome statistical system that the Vichy government had introduced seemed difficult to adapt. In 1944, when René Carmille was arrested on Resistance charges, the National Statistical Service that the Comptroller-General of the Armed Forces created in 1941 had about 7,000 officials. Carmille, who died after being deported, also managed to set up regional establishments and a training school.

The practical foundation for INSEE's creation was thus already in place when the war ended. On 2 May 1946 the former Resistance member, Francis-Louis Closon, who at that time represented the Republic in the north of France, was appointed to head the new body. From the outset the French NSI differed from its counterparts in other countries. Its job was twofold: study and research and production of data. It was part of the State administration, with a budget approved along with that of the Ministry of Finance, its supervisory body, and a Director-General appoint-

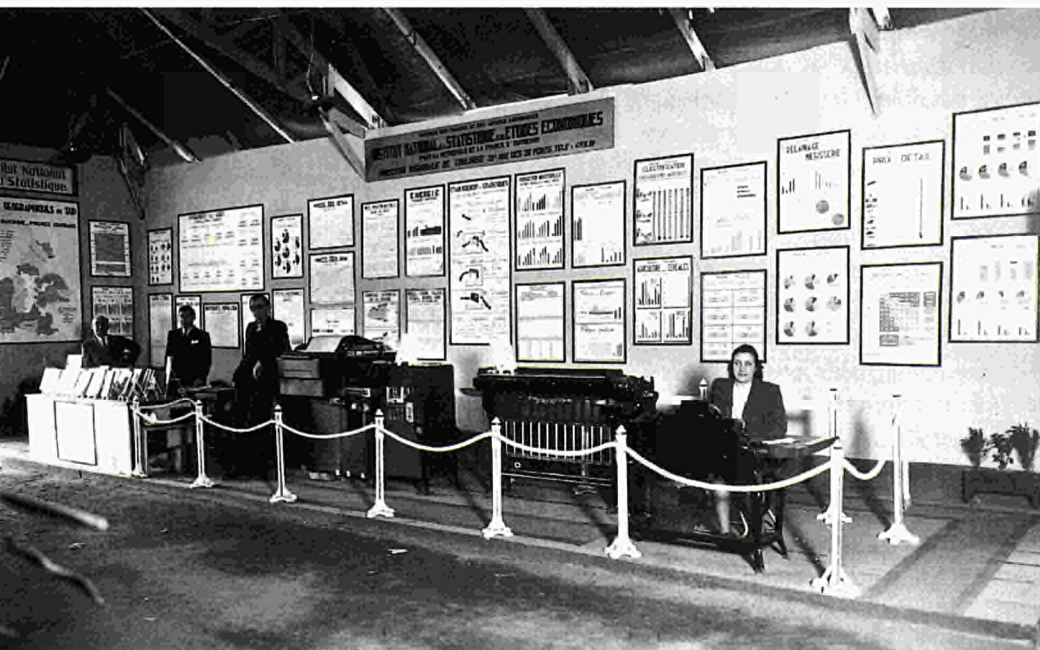
ed by decree but who can be dismissed at any time. The staff comprises officials recruited by competitive examination "who in their dual role of research and technical experts are unique among civil servants".

Francis-Louis Closon remained at the head of INSEE until 1961. His first job was to forge a single unit from a variety of services. There were doubts about the efficiency of data handling equipment and it had to be shown that it was no threat to individual freedom when the census was held in 1946. The new institute met the challenge but support in the form of legislation was slow to come, its budget was pared and the Government often did more than act as simple coordinator.

1951, second birth of INSEE

The law of 1951 ensuring statistical secrecy gave INSEE a real boost. This confirmed its central role in official statistics and provided the necessary resources by setting up the coordination committee. INSEE was thus able to conduct its first business survey among company bosses.

Manufacturers were impressed and a solid basis of trust was forged between statisticians and leaders of industry. But it was not until the Fifth Republic that politicians became used to the idea of a France depicted in figures. The end of the Fourth Republic was marked by government efforts to manipulate the INSEE price index (213 articles) on which the minimum wage was based. The institute found itself caught between manufacturers demanding that their products be taken off the index and employees resisting the idea because of the price freeze. The institute stuck to its guns and earned its scientific credentials. The pressure was proof of the institute's success as it revealed the political significance of statistics.



INSEE presenting itself at the Toulouse Fair in 1949

PROUD ANCESTORS

The Statistique générale de France (SGF) was the remote ancestor of INSEE. Founded in 1833 following an idea of Adolphe Thiers, this small organisation of some 160 persons, during the following 100 years, proceeded with censuses and surveys, calculated indices and published bulletins and yearbooks. The censuses, every five years, were handled by the famous "dames de la statistique", whose dexterity in handling punch card machines is legendary. In 1901, the then Director of SGF invented the "classicompteur imprimeur". This replaced the Hollerith machine, used until then for processing censuses. In 1925 the statistical office of Alsace-Lorraine was merged with SGF and so became the first regional department.

In 1940, France was obliged to reduce its army considerably, making thousands unemployed. René Carmille, General Controller of the Armies and a former member of the Counter-Espionage Service, had long been interested in statistics. For him, tracing people by the mechanistic processing of files could advantageously replace surveys and censuses. In August 1940 he proposed to the Vichy Government the creation, under the guise of a demographic service, of a recruitment organisation, that would be in a position to mobilize an army quickly if and when necessary. Three months later, the "demographic service" was born. Almost 1,000 jobs were created, mainly for former members of the Armed Forces.

To control people's administrative status and employment as closely as possible, the new service created a regional structure. After a few months in competition, SGF and the Demographic Service merged as a Service national des statistiques with René Carmille in charge. To the intellect of the SGF was added the "Carmille style" (ex-Servicemen) processing huge numbers of files. Carmille quickly transformed the new SNS into an important and well-organised body: 7,000 agents, administrators and attachés, the regional offices, the processing departments and the registers. His enthusiasm for files did not prevent him from being interested in modern survey methods.

An active member of the Resistance, Carmille was arrested in 1944 in the head office of the SNS in Lyon. He died in Dachau in 1945. Henri Bunle took over until the creation of INSEE in April 1946.

Heyday of planning

In 1961 Claude Grison, Inspector of Finance, was appointed Director-General. INSEE expanded and was given more resources while its reputation grew. Claude Grison's term of office was marked by the introduction in 1962 of the System of

National Accounts and the establishment, in the heyday of "planning", of short-term and long-term economic forecasting models. From this background Jean Ripert emerged. He took over from Claude Grison in 1967 when the regional economic monitoring units were set up.

Jean Ripert set out to overhaul the organisation of a body growing all the time in manpower. New data processing centres were set up, as well as a dissemination department offering a range of publications. In the mid-1970s INSEE staff reached about 7,000. Also at this time the institute moved into social analysis and regional studies. In 1974 it finally came of age – symbolised by the move to new premises at Porte de Vanves in Paris.

With the planning work of the first Directors-General over, it was a scientist, Edmond Malinvaud, who took over as Director-General in 1974. His early years were marked by considerable investment, especially in computer resources. At the beginning of the 1980s, legislation on decentralisation led the institute to increase its regional activities at the same time as technical cooperation took off.

Jean-Claude Milleron came from forecasting. When appointed in 1987 he consulted more than 2,000 officials on the institute's future. Result was adoption of a plan to provide public service, with modern communications, working methods and promotion opportunities for officials. INSEE also played its part internationally by cooperating with countries in Central and Eastern Europe as they emerged from communism. Since October 1992 the Director-General has been Paul Champsaur, again from forecasting. Under his direction, productivity has been increased and training reorganised. Publications dealing with short-term trends were revamped in 1995 to reflect an economy with increasingly cyclical features. Aware of the need to improve relations with firms, Paul Champsaur is endeavouring to adapt the institute's structures so that their needs can be better understood and satisfied.

The Director-General speaks

Paul Champsaur is the present INSEE Director-General. His leadership is characterised by trying to increase staff satisfaction by giving them more freedom, responsibility and flexibility. Here he answers questions put to him by Sigma's JEAN DRAPPIER...



Paul Champsaur – INSEE's Director-General since 1992

Which INSEE strengths would you like to emphasise?

INSEE has made tremendous progress in 50 years. It inherited from its predecessors a long tradition of demographic statistics: censuses have been conducted regularly in France since 1833. On the other hand, in 1946 INSEE was lagging behind with regard to statistics and studies of the economy. We have mostly caught up now, and we have also launched lots of investigations into short-term trends and living conditions.

INSEE is marked by three particular features. It is heavily involved in economic and social studies. It has a centre for higher education and research. It can base the directions of its statistical programme on the opinions of the *Conseil National de l'Information Statistique*, which brings together the leading operators at national level.

And the main weaknesses?

There is still a lot to be done to satisfy better in a prompt and convenient manner the requirements of enterprises for national and international information.

How do you think other NSIs regard INSEE?

It is hard to say exactly what image our European colleagues have of us. We have excellent relations, to a greater or lesser degree, with all our counterparts. When I meet my colleagues at meetings of the SPC (Statistical Programme Committee) or bilaterally, I am struck by the fact that we get a lot out of exchanging views and comparing methods. I really encourage my people to keep in contact with

their counterparts in the other NSIs: the construction of Europe takes place at every level.

In this sense, I trust that the other EU NSIs have a positive image of INSEE.

What about INSEE's image among enterprises: what needs to be changed?

INSEE enjoys a very good reputation among large enterprises, since they are interested in our statistical information and our economic studies. Small enterprises, however, react against the work involved in replying to our questionnaires. We are trying to develop information suited to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises, and to limit the burden on them by compiling statistics from administrative records.

How do you see INSEE as part of the European Statistical System?

Rather than calling it the European Statistical System - which to the French mind suggests a formal structure - I prefer to call it the European Statistical Area, which I feel reflects better the reality of the partnership between NSIs and Eurostat.

In this area, Member States are responsible by virtue of subsidiarity for the collection of data according to the methods they deem suitable, the degree of harmonisation having been decided at Community level.

INSEE recently helped to push forward at the SPC some items considered vital for economic and monetary union: harmonisation of consumer price indices and ESA-95.

It has also agreed to chair a study group on the repercussions for the activities of the NSIs of the changeover to a single currency.

How are your relations with Eurostat?

I get on very well with Yves Franchet. We are constantly in touch, which means we can get right down to business. In addition, the people at INSEE are constantly in touch with counterparts at Eurostat, and I encourage them to keep this contact up a permanent basis, rather than simple involvement in working parties.

Over the years I have learnt to appreciate Eurostat's difficulties in reconciling all the pressures on NSIs in an effort to meet the needs of users of Community data. INSEE endeavours as much as it can to help Eurostat find solutions.

What new objective do you think the most important at present?

I think the role of statistical institutes should be clearly defined in the Treaty of European Union.

What is your happiest memory at INSEE?

I must choose between two. When I was Director of Studies at the National Statistical School, it was my good luck to work under Jean-Claude Milleron and then Yves Franchet. Later, when I returned to take charge of INSEE after 11 years away, I was welcomed warmly.

What do you wish for your staff now?

I hope their work continues to be more and more interesting. When INSEE was founded 50 years ago, the work was very repetitive and very exacting. There has been tremendous progress in making it more interesting, increasing responsibility and widening the range for everyone. But more can still be done, and advances in micro-informatics are helping a lot.

A VERY EUROPEAN NSI

At the end of the eighties Jean-Claude Milleron, the then Director-General, said his aim was to turn INSEE into "the most European NSI". The presence of Yves Franchet, a former INSEE administrator, at the head of Eurostat since 1987, is thus symbolic, and underscores INSEE's EU orientation. Today Eurostat has seven civil servants seconded by INSEE and 11 detached experts, paid by the Commission. In 1995 INSEE took part into more than 130 Community working groups.

This work was particularly intense in terms of harmonisation of price indices and national accounts, a traditional area of excellence of the French NSI. Interest in social statistics, on the other hand, is more recent through links developed with the Italians. INSEE also maintains strong connections with other European NSIs. An exchange of officials is in process with the UK ONS in the field of urban statistics; another is being considered with the Statistisches Bundesamt, following a common publication on price indices. And INSEE is working with the Dutch NSI on telematics towards smoother collection of business data.

INSEE invests fully in technical assistance programmes sponsored by Eurostat. This is the case for the elaboration of price indices in the franc zone, made necessary by devaluation of the CFA franc. Privileged links between France and several countries also explain the role of INSEE in the Phare programme, especially in Poland and Rumania. There are also projects within the CIS frame, especially in Russia and the Ukraine.

Further reading:

- *INSEE des origines à 1961: évolution et relation avec la réalité économique, politique et sociale*, economic history thesis by Béatrice Touchelay, University of Paris XII, 1993.
- *2 mai 1996: l'INSEE a cinquante ans*, Béatrice Touchelay, Les Echos, 2 May 1996.
- *Cinquante ans d'INSEE...ou la conquête du chiffre*, INSEE, 1996, 220 pages.
- *Echanges finances*, June 1996, report on the 50th anniversary, pp. 13-25.
- *Echo*, INSEE in-house monthly publication.
- *Pour une histoire de la statistique*, collected writings, Joëlle Affichard Editions, Economica, INSEE, 1977, republished 1987.

INSEE workshop Statistics and business networks

INSEE is organising a business statistics workshop in Paris on 20 November. The subject is business networks.

From simple sub-contracting to more sophisticated and diverse relationships, networks are a characteristic of today's productive system – involving purchasing, as well as production, distribution, and also human resources and research and development.

How are these structures set up? Why does this kind of organisation develop? What are the networks' impact on the life of a firm? What are their limits and obligations?

The workshop will begin by looking at different types of networks. Then it will examine the main consequences of such organisations for business statistics and the way French and European statisticians can adapt.

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DGINS conference in Vienna

R

egistering experiences

by Barbara Jakob

For this year's two-day meeting of the Directors-General of the National Statistical Institutes of the EU and EEA in May, the Austrian Central Statistical Office (ÖSTAT), joint organiser with Eurostat, chose an imposing setting – the Hofburg in Vienna, former feudal seat of the Habsburgs. In contrast to last year, a specialist statistical topic was discussed at this, the 82nd DGINS conference "Statistical business registers - problems and opportunities".

Although every effort has been made to harmonise statistics in the EU, and much achieved, there are still areas where Member State practices diverge sharply, due to long-established systems and national idiosyncrasies. Business registers are a classic example.

The conference focused on exchanging experiences and establishing the positions of individual statistical offices.

Different starting points

Although starting points varied greatly, they all agreed that, from the point-of-view of both quality and cost reduction, the increased



The host, Mr Erich Bader (front, third from left), together with Yves Franchet, Director-General of Eurostat, and colleagues from EU/EEA statistical offices

use of statistical registers was the right approach. Although surveys would not be dispensed with completely, it should be possible to have fewer on a smaller scale - a cost-effective solution that would ease the burden on respondent enterprises. It was agreed this was a compelling argument in view of the dwindling budgets of many statistical offices.

Mr Paul Champsaur, Director-General of INSEE (France), and Mr Kopsch, Head of Division, representing Dr Gerhard Bürgin, Vice-President of the Statistisches Bundesamt (Germany), gave an idea of work in this area currently being undertaken by EU/EEA statistical offices.

While the central position enjoyed by statistics within the administration provided France with generous access to administrative records and thus a head start when compil-

ing registers, the basic conditions were quite different in Germany. Generally accessible public registers such as the Commercial Register were the exception. Access by third parties, including the statistical offices, to administrative data, was not possible at present. Authorisation to use administrative data of this type could be granted only by special legal provisions.

Other features peculiar to Germany further complicated matters:

- The federal structure of the state meant that registers were kept by the authorities of 16 different Länder.
- Registers did not work with a single identification system but used special numbering. Fear of "Big Brother", which prompted the heated debate about data protection in the '70s, should also be seen

against the backdrop of the Nazi past. Data protection was now particularly highly prized in German-speaking countries. Access to administrative data, of whatever sort, and the possibility of interlinking aroused deep suspicion.

Before an EU-wide statistical business register could be set up, the Statistisches Bundesamt faced a number of hurdles, whereas conditions were almost perfect for INSEE.

One clear message emerged from the papers and discussion:

Thanks to their long experience with registers, countries such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark definitely had the edge in terms of know-how. Not only did they have access to various administrative registers, they could easily combine data and thus produce meaningful statistics inexpensively.

Not a "cheap" alternative

Mr Jan Carling, Director-General of Statistics Sweden, in his paper *The role of administrative registers in Sweden's statistical system* concentrated on system-related aspects. He explained how the network of statistical and administrative registers worked in Sweden, and how this might be turned to good account.

"However, we should not see administrative data as a cheap alternative to sample surveys", he warned. Both methods might be equally well suited to a given situation. Their combination might lead to rationalisation and optimisation.

Mr Timo Relander, Director-General of Statistics Finland, explained why restricting access to administrative registers, usually justified on the grounds of data protection, was in fact unwarranted.

He described his office's long experience of using registers to illustrate how data protection requirements could be met.

The Director-General of Statistics Denmark, Jan Plovsing, talked about globalisation, the information society and the consequent demands on statistical business registers.

Felling trees in statistical forests

Finally, **Mr Hans-Günther Merk**, former **President of the Statistisches Bundesamt** in Wiesbaden, returned to aspects of statistical policy and the future of the European Statistical System. He focused on the "problems of empty coffers and increasing information requirements". National statistical offices obviously had to contribute to national savings programmes. He

added: "Wherever trees in the statistical forest are found to have withered away or to be growing too closely, they should be cut down. If, however, too much green timber is felled, the viability of the forest (ie the statistical system) is in jeopardy, and the damage will be much greater than the apparent savings achieved."

Several participants stressed that the use of statistical or administrative registers would do much to achieve rationalisation. They were also a "key factor in improving efficiency and quality", said Mr Carling.

The general tenor was that the other Member States should follow the lead of Nordic countries in know-how and experience to ensure that the advantages of using registers were used to full account. The future meant closer cooperation in this field.



The Hofburg in Vienna – an imposing setting for the DGINS Conference

Eurostat and DGXIII (Telecommunications, Information Market and Exploitation of Research) of the European Commission jointly organised an international conference on innovation measurement and policies in May in Luxembourg. It brought together about 300 participants from 30 countries including USA, Canada, Japan, South Korea and Russia, giving them the opportunity to share experiences.

A focal point was the Community Innovation Survey (CIS) and, in particular, the analysis and use of results.

Innovation on innovation

by Jean Drappier



Maurits Pino (left) and Mikael Åkerblom, Eurostat D3 – Research and Development and Statistical Methods

In the past policymakers lacked comprehensive information on various aspects of the innovation process: the resources required and how enterprises acquire, develop and transfer technology in different enterprises, industries and countries. Thanks to the joint efforts of

Eurostat, DG XIII and OECD, this is no longer the case.

The role of innovation in the development of enterprises and growth of industries could not be identified. This lack was a serious obstacle to the development of

soundly-based economic and industrial policies. The CIS project is part of the solution.

This survey, a joint initiative of DG XIII and Eurostat, contains responses from some 40.000 enterprises in Europe, using a harmonised EU questionnaire based on OECD methodology. Data have been checked and 'cleaned' and missing values estimated by Eurostat. They are comparable for 10 out of the 13 participating countries (Greece, Portugal and UK do not strictly compare because of partial information or a too-low response rate.)

Ready for use

The main CIS database is now ready for substantive analysis. In fact, there are two databases: one consists of the original individual data, which is confidential and can be used only by a very limited number of Eurostat staff; the other is called the micro-aggregated database (technically not confidential and can be disseminated if countries allow, which five countries do). The latter is derived from the former by modifying the original values in a way that protects their confidentiality but still allows analysis at enterprise level. The methodology applied for micro-aggregating the data was developed by the Eurostat unit covering innovation statistics, D3.

Both databases are being used increasingly for analytical purposes.

Key barriers

First results revealed some key barriers to innovation in European industries:

■ **financial barriers** were generally the most significant throughout the range of enterprises, but in the Netherlands,

Belgium and, to a lesser extent, Denmark this was more of a problem for larger enterprises

■ **internal competence:** in handling innovation, enterprises are faced with lack of skilled personnel, difficulty in controlling costs and resistance to technical change. Such barriers tend to be more of a problem for smaller enterprises, particularly in Spain and Ireland

■ **other barriers** were perceived as less important: lack of information on markets and technologies and lack of opportunities to cooperate with other enterprises; problems of intellectual property rights; shortage of suitably 'stimulating' customers etc.

Finance is obviously the main barrier, particularly in industries requiring major development costs, such as electronics and electrical engineering.

Future Developments

Eurostat is working on a CD-ROM with tables on innovation to be published before the end of the year.

DGXIII and Eurostat have agreed to organise a second harmonised survey to monitor innovation more closely. It is intended to launch this survey in 1997. Helped by evaluation of the first survey and the conclusions of the conference, Eurostat should be able to improve its efforts towards guaranteeing international comparability.

For additional information

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MEDSTAT is the Euro-Mediterranean statistical cooperation programme launched in Valencia last December as part of the EURO-MED initiative. It is a regional programme involving the Mediterranean partners¹. A seminar in Naples², organised jointly by Eurostat and ISTAT (the Italian statistical office) on 18-20 June, reviewed progress so far and decided on the next steps.

MEDSTAT takes off in Naples

A new community of statisticians emerges

by Martine Kleinberg



Responding to the need for cooperation (l to r): Paolo Garonna, Director-General of ISTAT, hosting the Naples seminar; Rino Serri, Under-Secretary of State at the Italian Foreign Ministry; Fernando de Esteban, Eurostat Director; Bernard Langevin, Head of Eurostat Unit A5, mainstay of MEDSTAT; Bernard Boigelot, European Commission DG IB; Luca Ascoli, Eurostat Unit A5

The EURO-MED initiative was launched at the Essen European summit in December 1994 and endorsed at the Barcelona Conference last November. The idea was to create an area of peace, prosperity and free trade in the Mediterranean.

Eurostat was quick to use the opportunity to incorporate statistical aspects in this vast programme. And the Barcelona Declaration

resolved "to promote cooperation on statistics in order to harmonise methods and exchange data".

The first statistical seminar resulting from this, in Valencia, laid down guidelines and decided to start work in five areas:

¹ Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

² Attended by all EU Member States except Ireland and Luxembourg and by all Mediterranean partners except Syria.

- training of statisticians
- environment
- external trade
- tourism
- migration.

During the winter of 1995-96 Eurostat – in conjunction with DG IB of the European Commission, responsible for external economic relations, especially with Mediterranean countries – drew up the regional MEDSTAT project with a budget of ECU 20 million over four years. On 21 May this year the MEDA Committee, comprising representatives of the 15 Member States, formally approved the project.

Naples decisions

Decisions were taken at the Naples seminar on the following:

- setting up working parties on training and information systems as well as on statistics on external trade, migration and transport; they will take their place alongside other working parties set up after the Valencia meeting to work on tourism and environmental statistics
- publication and widespread dissemination of a quarterly bulletin on short-term macro-economic indicators



During the seminar Yves Franchet, Director-General of Eurostat, signs a bilateral agreement with the COS, the national statistical institute of Malta. On his right: Alfred Camilleri, Director of COS; Vincent Galera, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Economic Services, and Reno Camilleri, statistical adviser



K Ben Fekih (l), Director-General of the Tunisian NSI, which in June 1997 will host the first meeting of the MEDSTAT steering committee, together with Bernard Langevin and Fernando de Esteban

- organisation of a seminar on new technologies, jointly by Eurostat and the Israeli Central Statistical Office next March to which all EU Member States and the Mediterranean countries will be invited
- scheduling the first meeting of the MEDSTAT steering committee next June in Tunisia; this will replace the earlier Euro-Mediterranean seminars and consist of the 12 Director-Generals of the Mediterranean partners and their counterparts from the 15 EU Member States under the chairmanship of the Commission ie Eurostat and DG IB (External Relations).

New sense of solidarity

First stage of the programme will be to arrange fact-finding missions to each of the 12 Mediterranean partners. Aim is a thorough review of the national statistical systems – their difficulties and measures that could be covered by statistical cooperation with the EU.

Actions introduced will, of course, be primarily regional, involving sev-

eral if not all the countries. MED-STAT could well be supplemented by other, bilateral national projects, requiring supplementary funding.

Everyone is starting from scratch in these efforts to cooperate with and between the Mediterranean NSIs. There have been some tentative local efforts, involving two or even three countries, but they have been very low-key, and collaboration with the EU hitherto has been limited and strictly bilateral. What is being witnessed now is the emergence of a new community of statisticians, marked by a new sense of solidarity around the Mediterranean.

Bernard Langevin, Head of Eurostat Unit A5 (relations with ACP and other developing countries), stresses the importance of this policy. He says: "The main challenge we have to face is to run such a major programme with so little in terms of human resources. Subsidiarity is the key. Networking will not be enough, but – as Yves Franchet, Director-General of Eurostat, has put it – we need to foster a network of networks."

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