

# Supporting the 4<sup>th</sup> Pillar of Democracy: Dissemination of Official Statistics through the media

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## **Abstract**

"The state authorities shall facilitate an open and enlightened public discourse" states paragraph 100 in the Norwegian Constitution.

Today's media landscape is increasingly fast-paced, requiring short-format content in an ever-growing ocean of disinformation and biased representations of reality. Journalists are under pressure to deliver quality content that captures the public's attention within short timeframes. How do we support and utilize the media in disseminating statistics and contribute to an enlightened public discourse?

This paper aims to discuss the following:

- Which role should NSI's take in outreach and dissemination of statistics through the media?
- How do we translate statistics into stories that can be told?
- How do we train and support subject matter spokespersons for NSO's?
- Is the European Statistics Code of Practice sufficiently covering the quality of dissemination of statistics?

The discussion draws on the authors professional experience from being a spokesperson for Statistics Norway's Media Barometer by performing live TV- radio- and podcast interviews, holding press conferences and being in frequent contact with journalists and other users, along with training new spokespersons of official statistics.

Quality in dissemination and our contribution to democracy requires a discussion on what role should producers of official statistics take in contributing to an enlightened public discourse. The paper suggests several approaches and presents practical examples.

At last, the paper discusses if the principles in the European Code of Practice sufficiently provides guidelines for the communication and dissemination of official statistics into the future. Perhaps is there need for an additional principle?

**Keywords:** NSI's role, media, stormy seas, outreach, storytelling

## **1. Which role should NSI's take in outreach and dissemination of statistics through the media?**

Statistics Norway is reaching far more people through media than in our own channels. This makes journalists important for the dissemination of our statistics. During 2023 Statistics Norway's statistics was included or featured in close to 60 000 media cases.

This includes various formats such as articles in newspapers, features on television news and radio segments.

The Norwegian media landscape has become more internationalized and fragmented with a shift from traditional platforms towards social media. Content is produced faster, in shorter formats and with more use of video (Reuters, 2024). National editor-controlled medias are under pressure from large global corporations, and they are losing ground when it comes to being the most preferred news sources for young adults (Schiro, 2023). There is a growing proportion of disinformation in the media landscape and in order to support healthy democracies, the statistics offices should support the 4<sup>th</sup> pillar of democracy, the editor-controlled medias, which includes public broadcasters and others.

Journalists are key disseminators of our statistics. They have short deadlines, must cover a wide range of topics from day to day and create content that draws in, and captures, people's attention. Communicating statistics and findings through the media requires that we work actively to produce content that the media easily can use and reuse.

Quality in dissemination and our contribution to democracy requires a discussion on what role should producers of official statistics take in contributing to an enlightened public discourse. Are we a provider of statistics and commentary when those are requested by the users or do we also set the frames for discussions and suggest topics and cases for different media outlets?

From being the spokesperson for a high-interest statistics, this article draws on the authors experience from working with the media as a statistics officer for several years. With every yearly publication of the Norwegian Mediabarometer we hosted a press conference with key findings followed by an open floor for questions, clarifications and on the spot interviews. At the last year's event we arranged a panel discussion around topics in the statistics. Adhering to principle 6 in the European Statistics Code of Practice, by not letting anyone have access to the data and findings before they are published, was challenging when preparing the expert panel. It was tricky to prepare the panellists to give commentary to findings without revealing results. Inviting external experts to a panel discussion was very interesting and somewhat time consuming to prepare and plan for and might not be something statistics offices have the resources to arrange and prioritize.

Which approach do we take towards the media? Do we take the lighthouse approach and give information and support when requested, or do we reach out to the large editor-controlled medias to offer cases, topics or spokespersons. When we do reach out to editor-controlled medias, it is important that this is in coherence with principle 6 in the Cop. As statistics offices, when it comes to outreach need to strive to treat all media outlets similar, depending on if they are national medias, local medias or somewhat partisan.

### **1.1.1 Target groups**

Statistics Norway's strategy states: "we must ensure that our products and services are adapted to different target groups." To support the strategy, Statistics Norway has created six target groups. They are broadly formulated with the goal to reach broadly within each group. The categorization is based on the use of SSB's products and what we know about our users. For example, the target group of researchers, the goal is not to reach all researchers in Norway with what one product, but to publish statistics in a way that ensures that the interested researchers will take notice and that the format is useful to them. Our communications department states that everything SSB publishes should be tailored to one of these target group:

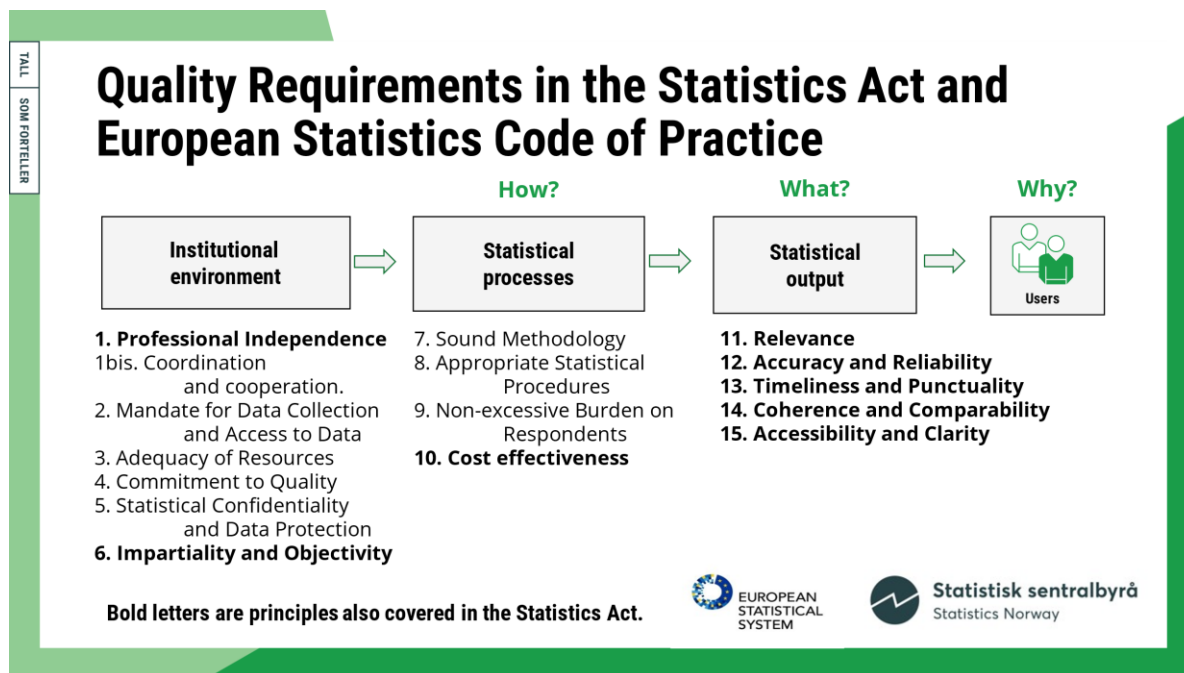
1. The General Public: Anyone who does not have significant special prerequisites to utilize statistics, but who is interested in questions that SSB's statistics can answer.
2. The Media: Employees in newspapers and broadcasting media. Broader disseminators of SSB's statistics.
3. Analysts/Decision Makers: Broader disseminators of our data to decision-makers, both in the public and private sector; as well as these decision-makers themselves.
4. Researchers: Employees in research positions at universities and colleges, as well as students at the master's level and above.
5. School Students: Students in middle and high schools in Norway.
6. Data Providers

### **1.1.2 Media as a target group**

The media and journalists are characterized by not having other prerequisites for using statistics than the general public. Compared to other professional users, they are short on time, and might rather skip over a complex text and choose one that is more accessible and faster to understand. We cannot expect them to understand technical language.

For each target group the five principles for statistical output in the European Statistics Code of Practice needs to be balanced according to their needs. For a journalist it could be more important that the statistics is relevant, timely and accessible, more so than accurate, but this can also be very specific to each statistic and target group. If the goal is to get media coverage of our statistics, complying with the principle of accessibility and clarity is key when disseminating statistics for the media.

Each statistics homepage on our website has contact information for those in charge, so the statistics officers are easy to reach for questions or comments. We also have a centralized customer service contact point that can answer questions as well. Statistics Norway aims to prioritize requests from journalists. The Norwegian statistics Act includes the principles marked in bold letters in the illustration of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) below.



## 2. How do we disseminate statistics through the media?

- So Emma, what's the angle? Said the communications advisor.

- What do you mean?

- I'm not supposed to have an angle; that's exactly my job. My job is to reflect the world as accurately as possible. It's like placing a mirror straight in front of something, not with an angle, not tilted from below to make something look bigger, or from above to make it look smaller.

- That's not what I mean Emma, what's the story?

- Oh, right, uhm, I haven't really had time to digest that yet, I've been so busy making sure the data is accurate and that the analysis is as good as possible.

- Ok, but what are the results, did it go up or down?

- Well, it depends on what you compare it with, and what you include.

The communications advisor rubber her eyebrows and sighed.

- Alright, let me ask you this, what's the value in this? Why should anyone care about your statistics? What did you find out?

Such interdisciplinary discussions are important when collaborating towards sharpened content that both satisfies user needs, statistical correctness and medias need for snappy headlines. For a message to be easily picked up by the media it should be simplified, shortened, and in some cases sharpened to highlight what is most important, is the usual message from the communications department. The headlines are often written to catch media's and the public's attention and a bold statement is later be modified and clarified in the following text. It is often a challenge to collaborate cross-disciplinary when working from different angles.

In my eyes, having an angle, would also collide with the statistics objectivity, related to the 6<sup>th</sup> principle in the European Statistics Code of practice (CoP). The communications advisor, on the other hand, needed to find out how the statistics related to the rest of the world and what could be interesting for the media. The communications advisor needed my skillset and I needed hers.

#### **PRINCIPLE 6 Impartiality and Objectivity**

Statistical authorities develop, produce and disseminate European Statistics respecting scientific independence and in an objective, professional and transparent manner in which all users are treated equitably.

6.1 Statistics are compiled on an objective basis determined by statistical considerations.

6.2 Choices of data sources and statistical methods as well as decisions about the dissemination of statistics are based on statistical considerations.

6.3 Errors discovered in published statistics are corrected at the earliest possible date and publicised.

6.4 Information on data sources, methods and procedures used is publicly available.

6.5 Statistical release dates and times are pre-announced.

6.6 Advance notice is given on major revisions or changes in methodologies.

6.7 Statistical authorities independently decide on the time and content of statistical releases, while taking into account the goal of providing complete and timely statistical information. All users have equal access to statistical releases at the same time. Any privileged pre-release access to any outside user is limited, well-justified, controlled and publicised. In case of breach, pre-release arrangements are reviewed so as to ensure impartiality.

6.8 Statistical releases and statements made in press conferences are objective and non-partisan (Eurostat, 2017)

Relevance is one of the principles in the CoP that is especially important when disseminating statistics to the media. When it is possible to connect statistics to current events, it increases the chances of being picked up by the media. Statistics offices can both be setting the agenda for what media picks up, but also connect upcoming publications,

articles and social media posts to what is already being highlighted by the media. When relating to and cooperating with the media it is important to balance the attention to and prioritization of the different principles on the CoP. As statisticians we can target some of publications and content to be relevant but also be mindful of not jeopardizing principle 6.

Statistics Norway's communications advisors monitor and use different tools for capturing what is relevant in the day-to-day media. Part of their work at Statistics Norway is to contact different large medias and suggest topics and spokespersons for content. They also create content for different formats, such as social media, short news articles for our websites and support the hosting of press conference for high interest statistics. While still adhering to principle 6 we can still create stories that can be told in the media.

### **2.1.1 From numbers to stories: Controlling the narratives**

As a statistician it can be especially challenging to lift your gaze after being buried in analytical work to assure validity, accuracy, and reliability in completing a statistics. From working with maybe huge datasets, covering several topics, quality assuring the details and it can be very difficult to separate what are the main findings, and how are they relatable to the world outside the office. Looking up from the desk was surprisingly challenging to me after an intense period of work to complete the statistics within the deadline.

The first step for disseminating is to create an overview of what your own results are and then summarize those. What are your main findings, and what was particularly interesting? It is then important to prioritize which content to highlight. Creating a story implies that something needs to be left out. If we highlight what is most important, rather than presenting everything as equally important, we are more likely to get through to the media and the public. A way to prioritize is to break your content into several smaller articles or short posts with a narrower topic. Perhaps some of the topics can later be used for single topic news articles, even after the main statistics has been published. This can be challenging for a statistics officer that sees the importance in all the topics in a large publication, but it is necessary to not overwhelm journalists. Perhaps a side-topic can be a short social media post?

Once you have narrowed the topic for a news article or a post, it is often necessary to shorten the content. It can be compared to creating a broth, we need to boil the content long enough to be left with a nutrient dense broth useful for many soups. This is a difficult task parallel to maintaining accuracy and a precise language. Current media trends show that shorter formats are prioritized by both editors and users (Reuters 2023).

By choosing what to highlight and consolidate lots of data into stories we support the media by giving them a more controlled narrative that can follow the numbers. It is challenging for a journalist to interpret what our numbers mean. This in fact, contributes to an objective dissemination, by ensuring that the main story is created within our control as objective and non-partisan as possible. Telling a story also requires placing the numbers in a context, often in relation to other statistics, developments over time or internationally.

I often advise my colleagues that perhaps in the moment of publishing a report, article, or statistics, you are the worlds' most knowledgeable person on your exact work. Therefore you are also the one who should work on crystallizing the information into a story that can be told. Why should you leave it up to others to create a story highlighting your data when you are the most knowledgeable of what actually happened in your analysis?

A lesson learned from publishing news articles and being interviewed live, is that the content and interviews I received the most positive feedback for, was not the ones with the most numbers. To my surprise it was the interviews with fewer numbers, broader story lines, more context and a less scientific language.

This is also a main finding when Statistics Norway conducts focus groups with users to evaluate what needs to be improved in our statistics. It is frequently requested by the user groups that publications of statistics include more interpretations and explanations of the numbers. They more storytelling to frame the numbers. To summarize; set the numbers free but include a story that explains them.

For the media we must use terms non-statisticians understand, especially in the title and lead, and explain technical terms where they cannot be avoided in the main text. At the same time, we cannot forsake precision, communicating uncertainty when that is needed and our professional judgment. One of my communications advisors once said; you know, sometimes I get the feeling that the statisticians are more concerned about speaking for those in their profession, rather than to the general public. I was definitely hit by the critique. Initially when I had been on live news, I was mostly concerned that my fellow colleagues would see me as scientifically correct, including being precise and using scientific terms. In using an accessible language we also ensure that the statistics is well understood and that we are the ones who translates scientific terms to regular terms, not those who are not familiar with them. One of my colleagues jokingly suggested that perhaps the best communicators of statistics, are the ones that are not that great at statistics.

It is advised to include quotes in written news articles. Statistics Norway often publishes news articles where a subject matter expert is interview by another staff. Journalists often copy quotes from our articles. If they can create an article without calling to

get a quote, it is easier to have them write an article about the statistics. One benefit is that we can control the quote, by the media simply copying a written quote it is less open for misrepresentation than in an oral interview. Another function of the quotes are to relieve the subject matter experts from some of work from journalists calling for interviews and quotes.

### **2.1.2 Spokespersons**

At Statistics Norway there has been a strategy of having statistics officers trained as spokespersons in the media. Choosing a spokesperson among the statistical officers depends on the topic of statistics and the persons qualifications and willingness to be visible on behalf of the organization. Training them well to be a spokesperson is important as they are the external face of the organization. When the public is lowering their trust to the media in a media landscape surrounded by disinformation, trust in specific institutions and persons becomes increasingly important (Reuters, 2024).

Training a spokesperson starts with the before mentioned steps. The story needs to be written and main points be shortened and simplified. They need to be offered media training and practice responding in live interviews. Training also needs to include answering questions they do not know the answer to, by being honest, but also building a bridge to something they can answer. They also need to know the steps before a live interview, if there is a researcher that prepares the segment, what to ask for, how to cooperate with them and how to behave on live-TV or radio. Preparation together with the medias researcher is also key ahead of a live interview. Use this time well to explain what information you can share, and what you do not know. It is also possible, and often well- received to suggest questions or topics from your statistics. We recommended to watch or listen to the program you will be attending, to recognize what language is being used, and whether it is the news or an entertainment program. My hope is also that we acknowledge the effort it takes to be visible on behalf of a national statistics office and support the colleagues that represent the organization externally and encourage more statistics officers to do so with the proper training.

### **3. Is the European Statistics Code of Practice sufficiently covering the quality of dissemination of statistics?**

Discussing quality in dissemination of statistics through the media, considering several of the quality principles, highlights perhaps not the need for an additional principle, but rather how they are to be utilized in combination. When there are challenges in balancing the compliance to several of the principle at the same time, it could be useful with a guidance on how they should be prioritized and ranked when there is crossing priorities. Surely, compliance to them should be balanced depending on the characteristics of the statistics, but



also the targeted user group. As discussed, in order to support the media with their user needs as well as comply with the CoP, principle 6 needs to be given priority above the five principles for statistical outputs. In addition to this it takes resources and cross-disciplinary collaboration to support the fourth pillar of democracy by disseminating statistics so that media easily can utilize our statistics and use them to contribute to a well-functioning democracy.

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