**What media wants from Statistics Finland experts?**

*– a study on how to increase the visibility of our experts*

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**Abstract**

*In the contemporary media environment in which the reliability of data is increasingly being questioned, the role and visibility of the producers of reliable statistics is becoming critically important. Correspondingly, among Statistics Finland’s core missions is to bring high quality data to as wide use as possible, in order to help decision makers, citizens, and organizations to make evidence based decisions.*

*The visibility of data produced by Statistics Finland has been consistently good in the media. However, the visibility of Statistics Finland individual experts has been declining in the newspapers. To learn what the media expects from Statistics Finland experts, and to understand how our experts can best serve the media, in the spring of 2018 we implemented a survey and interviewed journalists.*

*We received several useful ideas on how to develop our work with media. In response to our question on what would best motivate or help the media to use the knowledge of our experts, a common response was increased accessibility. Experts, their specialties, and contact information should be easier to find on our web pages. Moreover, the media representatives expressed the wish that our experts should provide more contextualization and interpretation; the TV and radio journalist also expressed that with the publication time 9AM the early morning “prime time” is missed.*

*It is important for Statistics Finland to support our experts to face media. Activating statistical experts to gain presence in social media gives them possibility to participate in a general discussion and makes them easier to find. Statistics Finland plans to publish statistics earlier than before. The new strategy of Statistics Finland is also supporting more active role with the media.*

**Keywords:** media, expert knowledge, accessibility, social media, media training

**1. Introduction**

In the contemporary media environment where the reliability of data is increasingly being questioned, the role and visibility of the producers of reliable statistics is becoming critically important. Correspondingly, one of Statistics Finland’s core missions is to bring high quality data to as wide use as possible, in order to help decision-makers, citizens, and organisations make evidence-based decisions.

Statistics Finland is a key producer of public data in Finland. One of Statistics Finland's main tasks is to make statistics available for the widest possible use so that they benefit different parties in society. The importance of using statistics and having a presence become emphasised in the post truth era.

Statistics Finland's visibility in media is on a good level but the visibility of experts has decreased. This has been evident in the printed media monitoring that is done every six months.

The aim of the interview survey for the media is to fill the gap that Statistics Finland has concerning media needs, wishes and possibilities for disseminating statistical information and improve expert visibility.

Statistics Finland regularly charts customers’ opinions of its services. Statistics Finland carries out, for example, business image studies, customer and user surveys. Media is one of Statistics Finland's customer groups, but no actual surveys targeted at media have been carried out, and the wishes of the media have not been especially highlighted in other surveys.

The aim of the survey is to gain information that we have not had in the past, but that could benefit the work of the communication department and experts, and Statistics Finland communication more broadly.

Statistics Finland's strategy focuses on the fact that Statistics Finland provides reliable information that should benefit users and reach them. The key message of Statistics Finland’s previous strategy was ”customer first”. The renewed strategy from spring 2019 emphasises that Statistics Finland "defends reliable information and broadens understanding". To achieve these goals, we also need to know about the media’s needs.

The media survey and interviews was also a development project related to the Tulevaisuuden Tietoasiantuntija (future information expert) training of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences.

**2. Results**

We carried out the survey in which we asked 25 different questions about medias attitudes and wishes regarding Statistics Finland’s communication practises and got answers from 43 different media representatives. We got answers from various types of media, for example from print, radio and television. We also interviewed personally 5 persons from different medias. The methods are described more detailed in appendix.

The results of the survey and interviews are very similar and therefore, they are discussed here together, in most cases without separating the survey and interviews.

Currently the main reason for media representatives to contact an expert directly is that they need specific details or additional information. Reporters usually wanted to know what is behind the statistics, background information for statistics and help in interpreting the statistics. It was also important for media representatives to get confirmation or rejection for their own working hypothesis and know if they have interpreted the statistics correctly. Some reporters wanted comments and a voice for their article.

*3.1. The visibility of Statistics Finland's experts is poor*

The interviews and surveys revealed that the visibility of Statistics Finland’s experts was seen as weak. Most of the respondents of both the survey and interviews felt that the visibility of Statistics Finland's experts is weak and low. Some experts even felt that the experts are surprisingly invisible. Often the data comes from Statistics Finland, but the interviewees are sought elsewhere.

"The visibility is too small. In my experience, Statistics Finland’s employees are true experts."

There were some explanations provided for the invisibility. Reporters do not know that we have experts of a certain topic and they do not know the experts by name.

Statistics Finland's experts were seen as very competent, but some reporters felt that they do not know how to speak to reporters or do not want to speak to them. On the other hand, there was a sentiment that the situation had changed slightly.

**Table 1. What is your impression of Statistics Finland's experts as far as visibility is concerned at the moment?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Opinion of visibility | Number of arguments, questionnaire | Number of arguments,  interviewees |
| Low visibility | 24 | 5 |
| Could be more visible | 9 | 3 |
| Are visible enough | 7 | 2 |
| Number of arguments total | 40 | 10 |

Many respondents also wished that the experts would be more visible because they have plenty of information and expertise. The respondents also wanted Statistics Finland's data to join the front resisting fake news.

*3.2. How could our experts be more visible?*

The study (interviews and survey) clearly highlighted areas where both our experts and Statistics Finland's communication department could improve.

The main means for the experts are being active, performance and opening data. All these promote recognition.

The actions of the organisation’s or statistical institute's communication department can support the experts and increase people’s knowledge of the organisation. Here we mainly discuss the measures that were highlighted in this study. These are earlier publication of releases, which would support visibility in electronic media, promoting experts and their areas of expertise on the website, promoting the communication department on the website, accessibility and bringing topical issues into public debate.

In addition, the communication department can support the experts in being active, opening data and perform by encouraging the use of social media, making videos and interviews within the organisation and arranging high quality performance training.

### Ways for experts to promote their recognition in media

#### Being active

The activeness of the expert consists of accessibility and being active towards media, as well as presenting topical issues. It is essential that the expert can be found and reached. The expert must be ready to participate in interviews in different media when he or she is asked or when the media tries to reach him or her.

Nowadays it is easy to be active through social media and to participate in discussions, as well as bring up topical issues. Blogs and videos at Statistics Finland are also a good way to highlight one’s expertise.

#### Opening data

Opening data means summarising observations, opening data and phenomena and interpreting them. In the study, reporters wished that there would be more and bolder statements on data and what lies behind the data. The following types of things were mentioned:

* What data means and what can be concluded based on it?
* The scale of the data. Is the change considerable?
* Views on long-term development
* Courage in revealing facts. If something can be clearly stated based on the data, this should be revealed.

The media representatives also understood well that the statistical expert cannot say everything, but the general feeling is that more could be said than what is currently the norm.

#### Good performance and the expert’s authority

* Understandable Finnish language, clarity, but also colours and good verbal skills should be used.
* Ability to summarise facts into a few sentences.
* Experience and expertise, and this should show. (An older statistician was used here as a stereotypical example).

#### Recognition as an expert

When the expert is known and a good performer and interpreter of data, he or she will be a desired expert to the reporters. Reporters should learn to know statistical experts by name because the same people are typically contacted and asked for interviews.

### Communication department's means to promote experts’ recognition

The interviews with reporters also highlighted ways in which the communication department and the statistical organisation can promote experts’ recognition. There are a lot of other ways in which the communication department can improve recognition, but this concerns the ideas raised in the interviews.

The means raised included pushing the release time for statistical data forward from the current nine o’clock, promoting experts and their areas of expertise on the website, promoting the communication department on the website and accessibility, bringing topical issues into public debate, search engine optimisation, reporting contact information and specialist areas to reporters’ search services, and supporting communication skills and activeness.

##### Releasing statistical data earlier

Mornings are loaded times for editors where you compete for the interest of media followers, plough through emails and read through various press releases that are usually released in the morning. When media representatives were asked about the best time to release new statistical data certain times were clearly favoured based on the rhythms of different media types and the reporters own working rhythms.

For those working in media, the best time for releasing statistical data was the familiar 9 am. This was the opinion of 49 per cent of respondents. It has proved good, for example, considering several editorial staffs’ working rhythm. However, there is a clear division between the working rhythms of printed and electronic media and their wishes concerning release times.

In all, 39 per cent of respondents wished the release time would be earlier. The justifications for releasing data at 8 am was that there would be more time to plan and contact the experts if necessary. Even earlier times were seen as better, especially by electronic media, because people follow a lot of news on electronic media in the mornings. There were not many wishes for later release times.

A clearly earlier release time than before would serve electronic media (TV, radio, online media) where the morning prime time between 7 and 9 am reaches a large audience, breakfast TV, for example, has 300,000 to 400,000 viewers. This time is also the most followed time of the morning for online media. In this respect, the reach of Statistics Finland’s data could be bigger, if the release time was earlier.

#### Promoting experts and the communication department on the website

Accessibility became an important criterion both in direct interviews and in the survey answers. No interview can be made if the reporters cannot reach the experts.

In the personal interviews a comment was even made that accessibility is the most important thing for reporters.

"Many have sufficient expertise, but who is easily reached and who is good at commenting on top of the expertise is rarer. These are the two most essential factors, the rest are trivialities."

Experts are also sought by improving search engine visibility and including the experts in reporters’ search services.

Accessibility is also supported by the expert being known because then editorial staffs know who to contact. Often the same experts are also used.

The communication department’s availability and services, as well as how easy they are to find were important. Reporters also often called the communication department to ask for people to interview. Reporters wished that the communication department would provide information on who is an expert in which field and what types of performers and interviewees the experts are. The contact information for the communication department should be easily found.

**Figure 1. Where do you look for statistical experts? How would you like to be informed about our experts?** Number of respondents 43

KukaMedia and Etsi Xpertti are reporters’ search services in Finland.

#### Bringing topical issues into public debate

By introducing data related to public debate we can improve the visibility of Statistics Finland's data. At the same time, we can promote our experts. Experts often also act themselves if they spot a public debate concerning their area of expertise.

#### Supporting communication skills and activeness

The communication department can also support the experts’ communication skills by arranging performance training, by performing on video, which is good training for interviews, by supporting activeness on social media, by supporting a culture of courage where the statistical expert can comment on statistical data more freely.

**3. Conclusions**

This survey and the interviews sharpened the view of what the media wants from Statistics Finland’s communication and experts. Moreover, we have a clearer picture of the criteria by which media selects experts to be interviewed.

The media representatives felt that the visibility of our experts in the media is lower than it should be. Visibility was seen as weak in relation to our expertise.

Statistics Finland's role was seen as essential and even as an obligation to present its data in topical discussions and in correcting errors. If Statistics Finland’s voice is not heard in the media someone else utilises its space.

If we want the media to interview our experts and make them better known, it is important to promote the experts and make it easier to find them, support them in performing and being active, as well as in expressing themselves clearly.

Statistical experts should believe in themselves as experts, also in the media. The communication department must support experts’ communication skills and attitude. Statistics Finland's culture should be made bolder so that we “have permission to comment”. Part of a statistical expert’s work is to spread information and cooperate with the media, even more extensively than before. This challenges the entire organisation. Our new strategy emphasises that Statistics Finland "defends reliable information and broadens understanding".

Statistics Finland's communication department has adopted a more active role, partly also based on media interviews. We have encouraged and supported statistical experts to be active on social media for a long time. Our main medium is Twitter, because it is a fact-based debate channel with political decision-makers, influencers, researchers and media representatives. The number of experts and the activity on Twitter has started to grow nicely.

We are compiling a list of experts for our website and try to make the contact information of our communication department easier to find.

Statistics Finland's communication department has increased cooperation with editorial staffs. In April 2019, parliamentary elections took place in Finland. Before the election debates we arranged an event for the Finnish Broadcasting Company, where we summarised topical issues related to employment and working life, wages and salaries, consumption, greenhouse gas emissions and waste in light of statistics. We will also arrange an event for summer reports, where we will talk about statistics and how to interpret them.

We have also tweeted statistical data during two election debates and thus participated in the election debate on Twitter. Our election communication has received praise both from active social media profiles and media representatives.

The communication department has also launched a weekly brainstorming meeting where we discus topical issues and what we could contribute to public debate. This has resulted in infographics, blog posts, and tweets. This has also helped us make our experts more active in presenting our data in public debate.

In early May 2019, Statistics Finland started releasing statistical releases at 8, before the releasing time was at 9. We hope this will increase visibility in electronic media.

The comments we collected presented many new challenges for our development work. We are already doing a lot of things well, but there is still much we can improve. We should strongly support meetings between experts and the media and this requires internal resources and encouragement. Changes in the operating environment and the evolving media environment has challenged the entire Statistics Finland to change and this is supported by many projects. Creating a more active relationship with the media should be a crucial part in the change to create a more communicative Statistics Finland.

**4. References**

Jaana Majalahti (2018), Mitä media meiltä haluaa? Tilastokeskuksen media-asiakkaiden toiveiden ja näkemysten kartoittaminen kyselyllä (What media wants from us? Charting Statisics Finland’s media customers’ wishes and views with a survey), only in Finnish

Asiakaskysely medialle (2018): Sähköisen kyselyn tulokset (Customer survey for the media (2018): Results of the electronic survey), only in Finnish

Personal Interviews with five media representatives, only in Finnish

**Appendix:**

## Methods

An electronic form and direct interviews were selected as the research method. We wanted a broad response base, so we used both an electronic questionnaire and direct interviews with media representatives.

The key question was “What kind of data and in what format does the media want statistics in order for our statistics and experts to be featured prominently?"

Other essential questions were:

* How could we ensure more visibility for our experts in different media? What should we do with various media to ensure that this happens?
* Would an earlier release time of statistics generate more visibility for statistical data?
* How would wider and more general use of embargoes work?
* How could we work in closer cooperation with the media? What would the procedures be in general and for individual media?
* What does the media want from us? In terms of statistical releases? In terms of Information Service? Training? Participation in ongoing discussions?
* How can we deliver information to the media that would support their day-to-day work?
* How far should Statistics Finland process its data for them to be most useful to media? How is this different for different media: TV, radio, the Internet, national and regional press, news agencies?
* What should Statistics Finland's communication be like in five years’ time?
* Should we invest in expert search services, such as Kuka service https://www.kuka.io/??

Based on these key questions we compiled 25 questions for the electronic questionnaire, some of which were open-ended questions.

The questionnaire was sent to 1,500 media e-mail addresses. The addresses had been collected from various sources and there was some overlaps and out-of-date data. It was sent twice to the same addresses and the survey could be shared with other interested media representatives.

We received responses from 43 different persons and reached representatives of five types of media for personal interviews.

Personal interviews confirmed and deepened the information collected with the electronic survey. We tried to get representatives of different media types to participate in the interviews. Direct discussions were particularly useful.

The questionnaires were sent in March 2018. The personal interviews with media representatives were carried out in May 2018 at Statistics Finland, the media’s own premises and one by Skype. There were two interviewers but in one interview there were four interviewers present. The interviews were recorded.

After the data had been collected, the survey and interviews were discussed and analysed. The tools were the electronic questionnaire carried out with Webropol and Excel. For the open-ended questions argument analysis was carried out. The essential content of the personal interviews was transcribed to make analysing easier. Suggestion on how the key findings should be utilised were also appended to the report.

Planning, surveying, the interviews and analysis was carried out in February to June 2018. The report was finalised in July to August 2018.