

“How serious would you say this is?” How to explain financial key figures to the public in times of crisis

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Abstract

When Norway went into lockdown in March 2020, there was an increased demand from the authorities and the media for figures that could explain the economic effects. At the same time, there were several private analysts and forecasters who took part in the public debate. These relied heavily on Statistics Norway's figures but did not present the complete overview and insight that Statistics Norway could. The Department of Communications saw the potential to be an important contributor to the public debate. At the same time, the Department for National Accounts struggled with how they should communicate the huge uncertainty in their produced figures, as a lot of the data base had vanished overnight. There was an obvious need for cooperation and benefitting from each other's expertise.

The cooperation between the two departments had a rough-ish start. The importance of the matter, however, finally pushed us to find a way to work together. After some time, the value of this cooperation became crystal clear to both departments. We managed to communicate our figures not only to our expert users, but also to the general public who now could understand the economic effects of the pandemic. A great deal of effort was put into storytelling towards target audiences and media appearances.

In many ways, this was the start of a new working method for the communication advisors. In this paper, we will present our experiences on how to succeed in the cooperation between statisticians and communication advisors – two professions that traditionally have very different views on dissemination to begin with – and how both can end up content with the result. And, of course, how this produce better results in reaching our different target audiences. The paper presents the Department of Communications point of view.

Keywords: Dissemination, financial key figures, storytelling, target audiences

1. Introduction. The rough start

Rewind to April 2020. Norway had been in lockdown for approximately one month. Mainland-GDP had fallen 14 percent during March (Bougroug and Sletten, 2020). Or at least, that was the statistical output. It was highly uncertain, as a big portion of the data base had vanished overnight when everything closed.

In a Teams-meeting from our home offices, representatives from the Department of National Accounts and the Department of Communications struggled to find common ground. Voices were raised as both parts felt their needs were not met. There had been an occasion where we had to contact newspapers after publishing figures because they had misunderstood and gotten it wrong. We weren't able to collaborate on the dissemination. Deadlines were not met. The situation was, to say the least, chaotic.

In the end, we managed to find a way to cooperate well with good results following. We also discovered that our method works widely in cooperation on the dissemination of all kinds of statistics. Later in this paper, we will tell you how. First, we will present our analysis of the dynamics of the collaboration between the statistical departments and the Department of Communications. In our experience, understanding this dynamic was key to find a way to make the cooperation work, and as a result of that cooperation, reaching out more widely with good dissemination.

2. What does it really mean to reach the public, and why should we?

This is, in our opinion, an important question to ask because we need everyone to agree on the answer. It helps us remind ourselves of what our goal is. The foundation of our work is the Norwegian Law of Statistics, in which Statistics Norway govern after. The law is very clear on the matter of dissemination. We are required, by law, to contribute to public enlightenment through good communication of our statistics. And we must make an effort to explain figures to all the different target audiences in our society so they can make use of them.

Law of Statistics §1.

*“The purpose of the law is to promote the development, preparation and **dissemination of official statistics that can contribute to general public enlightenment** and support analysis, research, decision-making and general public debate”*

This is often easier said than done. It is also a question of how we interpret the law, and where we set the bar. In our opinion, publishing tables with figures on our website is not equivalent to making the figures and what they mean available to the public. Nor do we believe only describing the tables in text, without any comments or explanations,

and in an academic jargon, is. That may make enough sense to our expert users, but not to the general public.

We live in a time where information is thrown after us on every platform, every hour of the day, and if it doesn't instantly seem relevant to us or we don't understand it, we move on to the next thing that screams for our attention. That is why we need to be extremely thorough in our communication and dissemination. If our statistics doesn't quite instantly make sense to the general public, there are - in our experience - two main risks. Firstly, figures can be interpreted wrongly and be misunderstood, and secondly, figures we believe deserves broad public attention will never be publicly known.

Prioritizing better dissemination demands more of our statisticians, and it demands more of the communications advisors. Both parts must make an effort to understand the mechanisms behind the development in our figures, and work actively to explain our findings well in our communication products. This will also make the statistical bureau better at producing high quality statistics.

We believe this need increases as the flow of information in our society increases. Statistics Norway is an institution of knowledge and should take part in the public debate by delivering the facts we can all rely on. It is important that we dare to put ourselves out there and show off our expertise. To do that, we must be confident in our expertise. Well worked through stories about our statistics will raise that confidence.

On the other hand, this goes against the traditional view of the mission of a national statistics bureau for many of the employees in Statistics Norway. Nevertheless, we believe it is what we must do to stay relevant, to maintain our high level of trust from the public and fulfill our own mission as the main supplier of facts.

3. Implementing target audiences

Persuading statisticians to disseminate on the terms of the users have always been a challenge. It may seem easier to write articles that contains "a little bit for everyone" and call it a job well done. The problem is that often, few of our users are actually happy with the product. If you try to reach everyone at the same time, you may end up reaching no one.

We found that the key to solving this was creating a set of target audiences and have the staff of directors, the bureaus supreme governing body, adopt it into the strategy. This was a thorough process over a year or so. The target audience strategy states that every communication product in the bureau must be aimed at only one of the six target groups. This way, we are able to raise the quality of our dissemination greatly.

The six target audiences in Statistics Norway are:

1. The general public
2. The media
3. Analysts / decision makers
4. Researchers (and students at master's degree level)
5. Pupils in school (effectively, their teachers)
6. Respondents

Further, we went through all our communication products and assigned them each a target group. For example, the news articles we publish along with new figures are for the media. They must have a news angle, be to the point, use understandable language and have quotes. We have also done a great deal of user testing to get a better insight into what our target audiences want and need from us.

In June 2022, we finished a tour in the bureau presenting the new target audience strategy for every department that produce statistics. Now everyone knows that a dissemination product only can have one of the six target audiences, and it must be adjusted as good as possible to please the needs of that specific target audience.

Before the implementation of the target audience strategy, we experienced a lot of resistance when we talked about this and tried to enter dialogues on how to best serve our users. Now that it is decided by the management, it is no longer a question. Everyone must comply, and we are able concentrate on offering good help on how to design and write the products.

The strategy is still quite new to a lot of people in Statistics Norway, while others have come a long way already. Hence, the implementation is still underway, but we are definitely reaping the benefits already. It has made communication and cooperation between statisticians and communications advisors a lot easier.

4. Finding our way to good cooperation

The target audience strategy is new, and even with that foundation, good cooperation between statisticians and communications advisors obviously requires a bit more. We spent some time analyzing what typically happened when we were unsuccessful, and what it would take to create a process that more often produced good results.

As previously mentioned, cooperation between the statisticians and the communications advisors is key to creating high quality dissemination products for the media and the general public. A communications advisor is trained to look at the material with an outside perspective, consider what journalists likely will find newsworthy, what might be a source of misunderstanding, and of course help to create an interesting story.

Most statisticians, on the other hand, have an academic approach to the dissemination of their statistics. Naturally, they do not have training in writing like a journalist. They are, however, trained to put on neutral glasses when looking at their data and may feel uncomfortable when asked to find a specific news angle. The trouble often occurs when the communications advisors search the material for newsworthy points and angles, and the statisticians may feel like we want to highlight something they are, and often for good reasons, not comfortable with. However, there might not be enough time to explain those good reasons because this process has had a tendency of happening right before deadline and lacked a good dialogue. The result was often communication products that neither one of us were quite happy with. But it doesn't have to be all about compromise.

4.1 The power of dialogue and (enough) time

We have seen great results just from initiating talks about the news article when there is still plenty of time left before publication. Preferably before the authors starts writing. This way, with the target audience strategy as an underlying basis, the communication advisors can learn what is necessary about the figures to help with the communication in the best way. We need to understand what is important and what might seem interesting, but really isn't because of this and that. We need to understand which

nuances that are key to explain certain aspects. We also need to understand what the statisticians are worried about, in terms of the audience misunderstanding something.

Often, the statisticians are also forced to work to understand their own figures even better this way, as they must to be able to explain it well to us. We also ask any questions that we believe is likely for the target audience to have, which might set off some more digging into the figures.

In the early talks about an upcoming publishment, we ask questions like *“What are these figures telling us right now?”*, *“What is particularly interesting?”*, *“What do you think is important that we prioritize in the dissemination and why?”*. It is also important to discuss what context the figures likely will be interpreted in. For example, when the media is full of stories about the extraordinary high electricity prices, we must put in extra work in the dissemination of the electricity statistics because we know they will generate a lot of attention. Hence, we must make sure that we answer the questions we believe the audience will have, and that the story doesn’t get misinterpreted by the intermediaries – the media.

By the end of these talks, the goal is that both parts fully agree on the story we’re going to present to the audience. We need to agree on the news angle, the important figures to include in the story, the explanations we will present and the context in which we will disseminate the story.

This way, there is time to find a solution that also includes the important nuances, details, and potential uncertainty in the figures. Often these things also contribute to making the news story better – if implemented the right way.

You might think it sounds like this would take a lot of time. In truth, it really doesn’t have to. Especially when we have cooperated with the same statisticians and statistics a few times before, it becomes routine. We may set aside 30 minutes at the time the statisticians have the figures ready, or almost ready. Sometimes a week or more before publication, and sometimes two days before – depending on the frequency of the specific statistic. The important thing is to make an appointment to have a talk a while beforehand, so that everyone is prepared for the cooperation taking place. In the talks, we agree on the story, and then the communication advisor can have a quick look when it is done to check that it looks alright.

All our experiences dictate that if we create a good news story, the media as good as copy-pastes our story. This gives us way better media coverage and good control over our stories. The latter is important: We can ensure that our statistics is interpreted the way we - as experts - think is the most correct way. Also, this ensures that we don't have to deal with the stress of correcting mistakes in the media. We have also seen that when statisticians experience that this method works, it lowers their stress levels as well. Needless to say, it's a win-win.

5. Back to the national accounts

A few weeks after Norway went into lockdown, the Department of National Accounts were asked to make a flash estimate of GDP. Statistics Norway has never done that before. However, the process of getting the figures published was chaotic and resulted in a bit of a sour mood between the statisticians and the Departments of Communications. Also, the communication advisors were not involved in the news article at all. Neither departments had figured out routines to secure cooperation in the dissemination.

In this case, the dissemination was especially important because the demand for these figures were extremely high. It was important that they weren't misunderstood, even though it was very complicated. It was also important that we managed to disseminate the uncertainty in the figures. The uncertain figures were interesting, but there was a fear of highlighting them because of this uncertainty.

In addition, this was before we implemented the target audience strategy, which created a challenge. Both analysts, the government, and the public (through the media) were obviously highly interested in the figures. The news article tried to please them all. It would soon be clear that the media probably suffered the most from this. We failed in giving them a good and understandable story that was easy to convey.

The same chaotic publishing process happened again a few weeks later, and this time we had to reach out to the media and correct misunderstandings. The article was very complicated and hard to understand for any member of the public or media, and because of that, figures were presented wrong. Having to make these corrections led to a lot of stress, and after this episode we had an evaluation meeting about the recent

challenges. This time, everyone agreed we had to set up better routines to make it work.

5.1 The break-through

The break-through, in our opinion, happened when we were able to get out a good story about the income and capital accounts a little while later. We had a long talk with the head of National Accounts, at the end of it, after decomposing many heavy technical terms, we finally realized we had a good story at hand and how to tell it to the public. And this time, both departments made an effort to benefit from each other's expertise.

The figures told us that Norway's central government had taken the burden from the both the private sector and the households during the last months of lockdown (even though many people are struggling – this is also important to state). The title of the news article was “*Government deficit for the first time in 25 years*”. After presenting the key figures in a short paragraph at the beginning, these quotes followed:

“The figures are uncertain and may be revised, but as of now we have a quarter with a deficit in public administration. In that case, it is the first time this has happened since 1994,” says Head of National Accounts Pål Sletten.

“Central government revenues have fallen, and expenditures have risen. Thus, the public sector has shielded the private sector from most of the decline in national income. The counterpart is that the state for the first time in a very long time goes from saving to deficit”, says Sletten.

Households, on the other hand, have seen a sharp rise in savings, Sletten points out.

“Disposable income to households fell by 1.7 per cent, in other words far less than national income fell. Consumption fell much more, so that the savings rate in the second quarter reached as much as 20.8 percent”, says Sletten.

The results were good. The news story, pretty much copy and paste from the one above, spread in the media across the country. And most importantly, both departments were happy. We managed to agree on a story that people could

understand, and at the same time highlight the uncertainty and leave no room for misunderstanding. The Department of National Accounts got a better understanding of how we can build good stories in our articles, and they saw the positive effects of it right away. From this point onwards, we started having an editorial meeting before every publication with the goal of agreeing on a good story for the media.

5.2 The mackerel

About a year later, these routines were still working well, and the cooperation was good. At one of the editorial meetings, the group of statisticians were talking about that if it wasn't for the mackerel fishing, the economy (which was still recovering from lockdown) wouldn't have grown much at all this month. When Kristin Fredriksen (second author) heard this, she immediately exclaimed that this is a good story. The answer was "*Doesn't everyone already know this? It's because of Brexit*", and she assured them that was not the case at all. Half-joking, she suggested the news angle "*The mackerel saves the Norwegian economy*". Then she watched the group casually nod their heads and say "*Sure, that could work*". To this date, she still claims that she almost fainted out of pure surprise that they were on board with this. We published a news article titled "*Good fishing resulted in high economic growth in August*", that got a lot of media coverage (and the newspapers chose photos of mackerel to illustrate).

6. Ripple effects

During lockdown, a lot of other departments in Statistics Norway also got asked to deliver figures and analyzes on the different effects of the pandemic. Beginning with the national accounts, we started to experience a change in the business culture and attitude. The demand for statistics that could explain what was happening was high, and the employees at Statistics Norway wanted to contribute in the way they could – with figures. We experienced that more people came to us seeking advice in this regard, seeing it was something different than they were used to doing, knowing the potential for a lot of attention was high, and not wanting it to go wrong.

In addition to working on the articles about GDP development, the head of the National Accounts Pål Sletten were trained by the communication advisors to do media interviews. And he did a lot of them, as the TV stations were covering the pandemic

and its effects all day long and had more time than usual to fill. Sletten's colleagues got used to seeing him on TV, and we believe it made the employees at Statistics Norway even prouder of their workplace than usual.

As communication advisors, we noticed that it had become easier to get people to do interviews. Sletten was accompanied by increasingly more colleagues from different departments training with us and doing interviews. It also got easier to collaborate on news articles – both with our improved method and a slow change of attitude in the bureau. The more departments who wrote good news articles and got their stories and quotes spread in the media; the more people were willing to give it a try.

7. Conclusion

The way we work with communication has changed a lot in the past two years. For the most part, this change has happened in the way we work internally in the bureau. We are able to put our communication skills to much better use after figuring out how to facilitate good cooperation with the statisticians and work more strategically with the target audiences.

In general, the key to success when creating communication products for our target audiences is always to find the balance between the good story and the necessary statistical accuracy and quality. That is the essence of the work of a communication advisor, in our opinion.

Our best advice for creating good stories for the media is the following:

1. Implement a target audience strategy that is widely accepted in the bureau. Talk about it often and make sure people understand what it entails.
2. Initiate talks about the upcoming publishment early. In our experience, it is beneficial that the same communication advisor follows the same field of statistics over time, building knowledge about the subject and relation to the statisticians.
3. Ask questions about the figures, whatever comes to mind as a “common user”, to understand as much as needed to be able to help.
4. Agree on a news angle that you are both happy with and make sure it's media friendly. Try to forecast what angle the media would use and choose that one.

5. Make sure to tell the most important things first in the story. This is the part the media most likely will copy/use if the angle is good. Make it tight but include necessary nuances and explanations. If something is very important, put it as early as possible in the article.
6. Use quotes for explanations, context, and other elements that brings color to your story. Presenting clean figures usually doesn't make a good quote.
7. Make sure it is as good as impossible to misunderstand anything.

Sometimes it is necessary to help the audience understand the scope of a development in financial key figures. It isn't always easy to know if a 2.7 per cent rise is a lot or almost nothing – it obviously depends on the matter.

This is a great opportunity to use quotes. Comment on the development to help the audience understand. An easy way to go about this is to let the statistician answer a simple question in your early talks about the publishment: **How serious would you say this is?**

8. References

Notater 2020/7. Nåsituasjonen i norsk økonomi. Achraf Bougroug and Pål Sletten, 2020.