

Social Reporting in Europe:
Different Ways of Adding Meaning to Numbers
Villa Vigoni, March 22-24, 2009

A LITTLE ABOUT A LOT

**MAKING STATISTICS
RELEVANT TO MEDIA AND POLICY**

*Everything should be made as simple as possible,
but not simpler. Albert Einstein*

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Why Adding Meaning to Numbers (and Numbers to Meaning)?

“A fact is like a bag: empty doesn’t stand”

Pirandello, Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore

*To stand, first of all determinant reasons
and feelings have to be sacked*

“Statistical data are like a bag: empty don’t stand”

Golini, paraphrasing Pirandello. A little about a lot

*To stand, first of all determinant multidisciplinary and
contextualized analysis have to be sacked*

“Sacking“ the Meaning into Numbers

N ***ecessary***

U ***nprejudical***

M ***ultidisciplinary***

B ***elievable***

E ***vident***

R ***eliable***

S ***imple***

The question of adding meaning to numbers is of great public interest, as far as Governments, Institutions, and Individuals are concerned,

because:

- # debates about socio-economic issues routinely raise questions that demand statistical answers;
- # convincing answers to socio-economic issues demand evidence, and that usually means numbers, measurements, statistics;
- # without statistics we have no accurate ways of judging dimensions and intensity of a phenomenon, and how well the policies designed to address the implied questions actually work;
- # statistics are too widespread and too useful to be automatically discounted;
- # every statistic is a way of summarizing complex information into relatively simple numbers;

therefore:

- # awestruck or naive attitudes toward statistics are no better than ignoring statistics;
- # nor is a cynical approach the answer: being critical does not mean being negative or hostile - it is not cynicism;
- # statistics *can* play a role in the assessment of research, provided they are used properly, interpreted with caution, and make up only part of the process.

A little about a lot...

While statistics are valuable for understanding the world in which we live, they provide only a partial understanding: *a little about a lot*.

That's the reason why, statistics not only have to be accurately produced and constantly "sacked" with multiple meanings, but also faithfully reproduced.

In the nowadays *information society*, where *statistical information* has to recognise to mass media the role of one of the principal communication channel to reach citizens, the question of

MAKING STATISTICS RELEVANT TO MEDIA AND POLICY

Becomes the more and more both crucial and complex.

... Without “fetishing” numbers

*“ There are cultures in which people believe that some objects have magical powers; anthropologists call these objects fetishes. **In our society, statistics are a sort of fetish.** We tend to regard statistics as though they are magical, as though they are more than mere numbers (...). **We treat them as powerful representations of the truth; we act as though they distill the complexity and confusion of reality into simple facts.** (...). Statistics direct our concern. In a sense, the social problem becomes the statistic and, **because we treat statistics as true and incontrovertible (...), they achieve a kind of fetishlike, magical control over how we view social problems.***

***We think of statistics as facts that we discover,
not numbers we create “.***

Damned lies and statistics, Joel Best, 2001

“Numbering” an Information Society

“We are firmly convinced that we are collectively entering a new era of enormous potential, that of the ***Information Society*** and expanded human communication. In this emerging society, **information and knowledge can be produced, exchanged, shared and communicated through all the networks of the world**. All individuals can soon, if we take the necessary actions, together build a new Information Society based on shared knowledge and founded on global solidarity and a better mutual understanding between peoples and nations. We trust that these measures will open the way to the future development of ***a true knowledge society***”.

***Declaration of Principles,
World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva 2003***

From a Services Economy to an Information Economy: Information as a gross national product (GNP) component

- an application to United States (Machlup, 1980) -

- the aggregate knowledge production made up 29% of the adjusted gross national product (GNP);
- the rate of growth was projected at 2.5 times the average growth rate of other components of the total GNP;
- knowledge production would soon reach 50% of the GNP;
- the total civilian labour force engaged in knowledge-producing activities was equal to 31.6% in 1969;
- if full-time students of working age were added, the total labour force would be equal to 42.8% of the population.

Power of information or information of the power?

- **In the** nowadays *information society* the so-said “**educational agents**” are no more just **family** and **school**, but **largely mass media**;
- the word “**Information**” derives from the Latin word “**Forma**”: therefore, the etymologic meaning of “**Information**” reminds to “**giving shape to something, forming a pattern**”;
- thus *information* is not only a finished product, but also a **(trans)formative process**;
- since the capability of every form of a “**free-minded interaction**” (with a person, with a book, with a theory, with a political think, ...) is a personal **conquest** gained **through** an achieved **education**, it seems to be absolutely crucial to clearly **identify the aim** pursued by a *globalised mass media system* as a new “**educational agent**” in order to real **understand to whom** information **really wants to give knowledge and/or power**: to the consumer, to the producer or even to a third subject?
- since **information** activities **include a management and exercise of power**, **which is the purpose** chosen by information producers to be reached via this **(in)formative-educative process**? **To save or to enslave a critical way of thinking**? Power of information or information of the power?

The political economy of Mass Media

- the Propaganda Model of Herman and Chomsky (1988)

- In *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media (1988)*, Herman and Chomsky explain a presumed mass media distortion as a consequence of structural economic causes;
- In their *Propaganda Model* private mass media are big firms which sell a product (readers; tv-watchers; internet consumers,...) to other firms (advertising agencies) and public mass media target and serve elites and lobbies' opinions, which also share decisional processes in the public/private sector;
- therefore, in order to select contents of their information they use five peculiar "filters".

Filter	Influence on information contents
Property	All dominant media are big corporations: therefore profit maximisation is preferred to information objectivity.
Funding	Major mass media present an accentuated dependence on advertising funding.
Sourcing	The need of an uninterrupted and articulated flowing of information, can be satisfied just by governmental and financial system, which could intervene on contents.
Flack	Actions which aims at discredit organisations and persons who don't agree with assumptions favourable to mass media, and therefore to the economic and politic conglomeration they are inserted in.
Ideology	The need of a central ideological core, which can varies from a society to another and from time to time, conditions informative contents.

Source: Our elaboration on Herman & Chomsky, 2007

Making statistics relevant to the Media

- In the *information society*, a society in which creation, distribution, diffusion, use, and management of information is a significant economic, political, and cultural activity, **statistical information** has to **recognise to mass media the role of one of the principal communication channel to reach citizens**;
- **mass media** can be very useful to **increase** first of all a spread “**statistic awareness**” and to **remove** both a sometimes accentuated **diffidence** towards statistic information **and vagueness** of statistic **knowledge**;
- the **perception and quality of statistics in mass media is decisive** for the image, appreciation and prestige of official statistics and statisticians in the society (Olensky, 2000);
- **citizens want** to have the more and more a **comprehensive and correct vision of social, demographic, and environmental grounds** in addition to the economic one which is more traditional;
- everywhere in the world and especially in Europe it seems that **media** - in particular newspapers and television - are devoting a **growing attention to statistical data**.

Hierarchical functions of information activities: mass media and official statistics (1)

- It is not obvious that statistics and mass media share the same **criteria** in order **to classify information between** the three categories by Italian Jurisprudence: **socially useful; socially not useful; ethically blameable;**
- and above all, **what does it mean socially “useful” or “not useful”?** It is quite rare that a fact, an action, a phenomenon and so on have the same “utility” for each social sector or social “unit” (a person, a group, a lobby, a party,...);
- it depends on what kind of **hierarchy of functions to be accomplished is attributed to a particular activity** in order to really understand the effective beneficiaries.

Hierarchical functions of information activities: mass media and official statistics (2)

- the last observation is really important to **compare information functions in mass-media and statistics systems**, to analyse if purposes, and consequently “utility’s beneficiaries” of their information activities are effectively the same;
- in those **occasions** in which there is **not a clear correspondence of aims**, for statistics producers it can be frustrating and in extreme situations also ethically difficult to offer to mass media statistical inputs which would be distorted, if not manipulated;
- in the nowadays *information society and economy*, to identify typical and **comparable information functions doesn’t preserve to a controversial relation between media and official statistics: possible hierarchical differences are sufficient to not share a complete aims correspondence.**

Hierarchical functions of information activities: mass media and official statistics (3)

SHARED FUNCTIONS OF INFORMATION			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">  <i>Information representing social, economic and environmental reality</i>  <i>Control</i>  <i>Information for taking decision</i>  <i>Consumption</i> 			
Mass Media Hierarchy		Official Statistics Hierarchy	
1	Consumption	1	Information representing social, economic and environmental reality
2	Control	2	Information for taking decision
3	Information for taking decision	3	Consumption
4	Information representing social, economic and environmental reality	4	Control

Source: Our elaboration on Olensky, 2007

Gaps between official statistics and mass media information (1)

GAPS BETWEEN STATISTICAL AND MASS MEDIA INFORMATION			
GAPS		Mass Media	Official Statistics
1	Linguistic	Speech of the “common reader” or “common viewer”.	Scientific and professional language of statistics.
2	Meta-information	Often immediately available.	Lack of glossaries of terms and methodological explanations.
3	Timeliness	To publish the information on the fact "live" if possible, or "one minute after the event" at latest.	To obey the scientific quality rules, loosing in rapidity in offering information.
4	Forms of presentation	Very short presentation.	Results of surveys with tables, indicators, graphs and rich textual analysis.
5	Context	Criteria of selection and structuring of information are subordinated to the principle of capture the attention through any content (frequently contents which hit the emotional sphere of the reader/viewer)	The stability and regularity of presentation of statistics in the same place and time in journals and newspapers, helps to improve the quality of reception of data.

Source: Our elaboration on Olensky, 2007

Gaps between official statistics and mass media information (2)

GAPS BETWEEN STATISTICAL AND MASS MEDIA INFORMATION		
GAPS	Mass Media	Official Statistics
6	Competence	“Statistical” competencies of journalists
		“Journalistic” competencies of statisticians
7	Deontology	Deontological Code of Journalist, which can vary from Country to Country (with some margins of discretionary power)
		Two fundamental document for deontology of statistics: ISI Deontological Code and the UN Fundamental Principles of Official statistics.
8	Technical	High technical predominance in the field of dissemination.
		Supremacy in the access to some information sources, methodology and technology of production of professional statistical information.
9	Partnership	Very active, in collection, processing and dissemination of information.
		Rather passive in research start-up and dissemination of results.

Source: Our elaboration on Olensky, 2007

Mass mediatic statistical information process: protagonists, elements and problematic issues (1)

Protagonist/element	Problematic Issue
Producers of statistics	Specific skills are needed to prepare statistic information for mass media, such as the capability to think the statistical process and statistical data content and presentation also in terms of the media, to avoid accidental distortion caused by misreporting.
Filter operated by communication offices of the statistical producers	Threat of an “excess” of simplification and of an “excess” of objective difficulty to adequately represent the matter.
Characteristics and content needed for statistics to be released to the media	attractiveness, timeliness, significance, readability, intelligibility, impartiality, temporal and territorial comparability.

Source: Our elaboration, 2007

Mass mediatic statistical information process: protagonists, elements and problematic issues (2)

Protagonist/element	Problematic Issue
Filter operated by news agencies	Mass Media have to be attentive in evaluating the qualification of the producer, and in making more frequent direct recourse to statistical specialists with high capability to divulgate statistical information.
Media as intermediate users of statistical data	It happens that mass media search for the most “sensational” number, because “anomaly makes audience”. Thus, sometimes more or less consistent distortion may be not accidental, in order to create headlines.
Public as final users.	Citizens express a controversial attitude towards statistics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - statistics seem to have an objective strength and reliability, just for the fact of being numbers and not opposable words; - statistics generate suspect and diffidence, tied both with a scarce knowledge and a bad use of statistics which doesn't contribute to confirm statistics as a scientific instrument to capture a right image of reality.

The Alliance between (official) statistics and Mass Media: conquests...

- Information society is a chance and a challenge for civil and political human rights;
- in this revolution, a good alliance between statistics producers, especially official statistics producers, and mass media could be a privileged channel through which to pursue the ethic and democratic purpose of favour and guarantee a worldwide freedom of thinking and acting;
- in the last time this exchange of contents, techniques and consumers has gained in thickness, exactness and continuity;
- classic statistical tools (tables, graphics and cartograms) in a not so far past considered too “technique”, nowadays have a wide diffusion through mass media;
- the alliance between statistics (producers) and mass media is certainly of a biunivocal use, reinforcing a positive reciprocal need: statistics – and above all official statistics – needs mass media, and mass media needs statistics.

... challenges and strategies

- this fruitful alliance could always be menaced by two delicate dangers, both related to statistics quality:
 - ✓ pseudo-survey proposed exactly by mass media;
 - ✓ not always true reliability of private or semi-private statistics.
- it is fundamental a shared ethic of information based on the right to be given a “true” or unbiased representation of reality;
- mass media needs and the respect of a correct reading of facts are not mandatory in opposition;
- many strategies can be imagined to improve the essential relations between official statistics and the media:
 - ✓ the increasing and reinforcement of institutional, national and international Organs of statistic quality control;
 - ✓ a more generous availability of human and financial resources, often scarce in order to properly answer to users’ expectations and exigencies: deep and quick behaviour transformations need the more and more those human and financial resources.