

# How to tailor press work if quality standards of official statistics conflict with media interests

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## Abstract

Figures produced by official statistics only matter if they arouse the interest of the public. The media play the most important part in distributing statistical information also to further target groups like political and economic leaders. Journalists prefer to make use of official statistics because they regard our data as reliable and objective high-quality sources. The Code of Practice (CoP) helps to maintain this solid reputation. However, its practical implementation in press work is challenging if quality standards do not correspond to the relevant perspective of the media. This paper provides recommendations how to communicate the CoP to journalists and to address obvious misunderstandings in the mutual relationship.

Using recent examples from everyday press work at Destatis, the paper illustrates how CoP principles (e. g. statistical confidentiality, impartiality and clarity) may conflict with media interests (e. g. disclosures, exclusivity and emotionality). Regular press monitoring helps to identify such critical situations:

- The privacy of respondents may be misinterpreted as covering up political or economic scandals.
- Journalists may see violations of users' equality in accessing statistical releases if competing media quote figures not explicitly published in a press release.
- Adding methodological background information to revised figures may not only be regarded as irrelevant, but also as too complicated and boring for the public.

Proposals are given on how to tackle tricky situations in explaining quality standards. In each case, a tailored communication strategy should be applied depending on the seriousness of the misunderstanding. However, there are no ideal solutions and, due to the diversity of statistical activities and press work, lessons can be learned from each case. Therefore, the conference participants are encouraged in the discussion to share their experiences in meeting similar challenges in press work.

**Keywords:** press and public relations, users' perspective on quality standards, communicating quality standards to users

## **1. Cooperating with the media to fulfill original tasks of official statistics**

Collecting, preparing and analyzing data are usually regarded as the primary tasks of official statistics. However, these steps are not an end in themselves. It is equally important to make statistical information properly available, which is sometimes neglected. Figures produced by official statistics only matter if they arouse the interest of the public. Finally, how much emphasis is put on user-friendly data dissemination strongly depends on the self-conception of the national statistical institute (NSI).

Being “the leading provider of high-quality statistical information on Germany” is one of the main strategic goals of Destatis [1]. It is our mission to supply basic data as quickly and easily accessible as possible, and usually free of charge. In doing so, the media play the most important role: Firstly, they are gatekeepers who comb through the ever-growing flood of information, selecting relevant figures in order to tell an interesting story. Secondly, they are disseminators of information who make the selected data available to both the public and target groups in politics or economy, thereby reaching a much broader audience. In turn, journalists benefit from making use of official statistics because the data allows them to build on unbiased evidence. They regard our data as reliable and objective high-quality sources.

The European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) helps Destatis and the other NSIs of the European Statistical System (ESS) to maintain their solid reputation. The 15 key quality assurance principles were first launched in May 2005 and revisited in September 2011. All ESS member states are committed to complying with the CoP, which is regularly monitored in the form of peer reviews. Moreover, the external visibility of such quality principles as professional independence, statistical confidentiality or impartiality was further increased as a result of a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on European Statistics adopted in spring 2015. Still, the practical implementation of the CoP in press work is challenging if the quality standards do not correspond with the perspective of the media.

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[1] Further information on the vision and self-image of Destatis is summarized on <https://www.destatis.de/EN/AboutUs/OurGoals/OurGoals.html>.

Journalists have the difficult job of facilitating public debate and anticipating what might attract public attention. Well-suited topics must have “news value”; therefore, popular selection criteria include, for example, subjects that have to do with unexpected events, affect many people, arouse emotions or deal with conflicts (for exemplary lists of “news values” see Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Kepplinger, 2011). Occasionally, journalists might find it somewhat inconvenient that official statisticians set such great store in the CoP, for instance, having to protect statistical confidentiality, treat data users equally or provide extensive methodological background information. These different views can lead to more or less serious misunderstandings [2] for which appropriate communication strategies must be considered to ensure good cooperation with the media.

## **2. Misunderstandings between the media and official statistics**

Using recent examples from everyday press work, this section illustrates how the quality principles of the CoP may conflict with media interests in reporting on newsworthy topics. The initial situation is described below in three case studies. Regular press monitoring helps to identify critical misunderstandings. At Destatis, daily press reviews are compiled and sent out electronically to inform senior management and subject-matter experts about media responses to recent press releases, press conferences and publications, among others. Another purpose for this is to get an overview of current media issues for which official statistics may be able to offer data. The press review analyses are based on keyword searches for the most important print and online media (approximately 120 sources). In addition, the reports of news agencies are evaluated, daily Google alerts are set up and user communication on Twitter is monitored. Dependent on the seriousness of an identified misunderstanding, appropriate countermeasures are initiated. A short outline of the tailored communication strategy is given for each practical example. Based on further lessons learned from the selected cases, more general recommendations are provided on how to explain the CoP to journalists and how to address obvious misunderstandings in the mutual relationship.

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[2] Excluded from this paper are situations in which journalists make inaccurate use of figures or interpret them falsely due to own interests or insufficient statistical literacy. Practical examples at Destatis for the misuse or misinterpretation of statistical information as well as strategies on how to address perceived violations are described in von Oppeln-Bronikowski, S., Kronz, C., Meinke, I. and Wirtzfeld, H., 2015.

## *2.1 Practical example A: Reaching the limits of transparency in the face of data protection*

*Relevant quality principle:* According to principle 5 of the CoP, official statisticians are obligated by law to protect the privacy of their individual, business or administrative sources. The information provided is for statistical purposes only and must be treated confidentially. This principle is intended to build trust in official statistics and related, typically obligatory, surveys.

*Initial situation:* In December 2014, the online platform of a weekly newspaper was interested in looking into how many military weapons Germany was actually sending to other parts of the world (Faigle, December 16, 2014). Destatis does indeed collect relevant data for foreign trade statistics. However, detailed information (such as the quantity or the value of specific military equipment according to commodity codes and destination countries) had not yet been published. Over the years, it has become established practice to keep the data on the export of military weapons confidential. The statistical information collected was used in highly aggregated form for the Military Equipment Export Report of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (2015). In order to increase transparency for all data users, Destatis intended to publish related information in its monthly statistics on foreign trade in the online database GENESIS [3], starting with January 2015 as the reference period. However, official statistics is also reliant on the cooperation of the survey respondents, who have to be able to trust that their data will be handled confidentially and who are willing to deliver reliable data in obligatory surveys in the first place. Therefore, the decision was made to inform the exporting arms manufacturers in advance about the planned changes in data dissemination. In foreign trade statistics (Statistisches Bundesamt, April 2014), individual data are to be kept confidential if they are sensitive in terms of specific data protection rules. Therefore, the extent of the publishable statistical information was rather limited.

*Media interests:* The journalist was understandably disappointed with the results of the information request. Despite efforts to increase transparency, it was still impossible to monitor German arms transfer activities in detail. In January 2015, the journalist wrongly suggested: “The Federal Statistical Office concealed data about exports of military

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[3] The English version of GENESIS is online since March 2016 on <https://www-genesis.destatis.de/genesis/online/logon?language=en>.

weapons” (Faigle, January 21, 2015). As the expected data disclosure did not take place, the responsibility for data protection was misinterpreted as an attempt to cover up unpleasant political or economic facts.

*Tailored communication strategy:* The journalist was provided with background information about the data protection rules related to foreign trade statistics as quickly and comprehensibly as possible. In response to the report in January 2015, these technical details were also used for a letter to the editorship of the newspaper.

*Lessons learned:* Destatis found itself in a dilemma: On the one hand, the aim was to improve transparency for data users. On the other hand, the confidentiality interests of the survey respondents need to be protected, no matter who they are. It might have been advantageous to emphasize to the media right from the start that the dissemination of detailed information was uncertain. Finally, the journalist recognized the principle of confidentiality, but criticized the fact that the data protection rules were not sufficiently transparent to be verifiable. It was assumed that more data than necessary had been “blackened out”. Unfortunately, Destatis did not fully succeed in bringing the perspective of official statistics to the media. However, the reporting of the journalist on this topic stopped after the letter to the editorship.

## *2.2 Practical example B: Ensuring equality of data users despite demands for exclusiveness*

*Relevant quality principle:* Principle 6 of the CoP commits official statistics to impartiality. This means that the NSIs must make statistical information available to all data users, equally and simultaneously. Exceptions to this rule are strongly restricted and controlled in case of violations. Pre-release arrangements must be made transparent by all means [4]. This is to avoid political interference and strengthen the credibility of the statistical results.

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[4] Destatis provides a comprehensive overview of the pre-release arrangements with political actors for selected economic or social indicators (<https://www.destatis.de/EN/PressServices/Press/pr/PreRelease.html>). If a considerable number of media inquiries are expected, government agencies or the central bank may receive selected press releases – at the earliest, at 2 p.m. on the day before the regular dissemination. However, the figures are not to be distributed before 8 a.m. on the official release date.

*Initial situation:* In August 2015, Destatis published a short press release (“Figure of the Week”) on the increasing number of employed people working on Sundays in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, August 4, 2015). This topic was not selected because of a current event, but rather to promote an indicator report on the quality of employment, which was made available on the website the same day [5]. A link at the end of the text referred to the online publication. The hope was that the approximately 50 selected indicators organized according to 7 dimensions were so well prepared that journalists would also want to incorporate some of the other interesting texts, graphs and tables into their reports about the German job market.

*Media interests:* The majority of the media reports on the topic only referred to the given headline on Sunday work. However, a daily newspaper published a longer article about the decline in the number of fixed-term contracts using one of the other indicators (Öchsner, August 5, 2015). The Destatis website was correctly named as the source of the original data. Several journalists from other media then complained that the figures on fixed-term contracts were not explicitly published in a press release. They criticized that the relevant information could not be found on the website or – even worse – mistakenly assumed that Destatis had violated the regulations that ensure all data users equal access to statistical results by providing exclusive information to selected media. The news value of the given figures obviously grew because the story was told by a competing journalist.

*Tailored communication strategy:* In personal conversation on the phone, the complaining journalists were guided through the Destatis website – from the press release to the link, to the tabs with the relevant dimension (“security of employment and social protection”) and the specific indicator (“fixed-term employment”). This was a time-consuming but effective effort. Data research on our website was illustrated. Furthermore, it was emphasized that Destatis did not violate the CoP because the entire indicator report was freely available to all data users right from the start.

*Lessons learned:* The internet offers equality of information. More and more, probably reinforced by the growing importance of social media, the press is losing its information advantage, even over the general public. With regard to official statistics, journalists often

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[5] The indicators on quality of employment can be downloaded on <https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/Indicators/QualityEmployment/QualitaetEmployment.html>.

take a shot at getting data before the press conference or before the scheduled online dissemination. Their arguments are plausible; for example, they need additional time to prepare graphs suitable for their purposes, or they have to get statements from other experts as well. Within the media competition where every minute counts, equal treatment is not always considered as beneficial. The misunderstanding in the above example could be easily cleared up, as not all statistical information can be presented in a press release, but it is on the website. Of course, the imperative of impartiality does not absolve the media from researching figures on their own. However, Destatis aims to deliver high-quality service and facilitate the often overwhelming task of getting a general overview in the “jungle of data”. The press release on the indicator report could have described in more detail which indicators were hidden behind the link. Also, it may have been advisable to present strongly demanded data more prominently on the Destatis’ homepage [6] or to distribute several interesting graphs via Twitter [7]. Finally, the problem might be that journalists generally need more support in finding statistical information. The press office at Destatis organized related workshops for the target group in June 2015 and in March 2016 [8]. Subject-matter experts explained what the general online databases contain and how specific information (e. g., about health issues or about Germany in the European context) can be easily found. Moreover, the participating journalists were given the opportunity to make suggestions on how to facilitate the use of official statistics.

### *2.3 Practical example C: Explaining regular data revisions correctly and interestingly*

*Relevant quality principles:* Principle 6 and 15 of the CoP oblige official statistics to present its figures objectively, clearly and comprehensibly. Technical terms should not cover up facts that might be uncomfortable for the NSI itself or for political and economic leaders. Instead, data users should be enabled to interpret and compare statistical results correctly, also by giving essential background information on data quality and methodology. Planned revisions are to be pre-announced in a timely manner.

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[6] Topics of public interest are usually supported with facts under the headline “In Focus” on the website. An overview of recent releases is given on <https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/InFocus/Archive.html>.

[7] Our English Twitter channel is available on [https://twitter.com/destatis\\_news](https://twitter.com/destatis_news), the German channel on <https://twitter.com/destatis>.

[8] The German workshop materials can be downloaded by all data users on [https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2015/Datenjournalisten/datenjournalisten\\_2015\\_Unterlagen.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2015/Datenjournalisten/datenjournalisten_2015_Unterlagen.html) and [https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2016/Eurostat/eurostat\\_Uebersicht.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2016/Eurostat/eurostat_Uebersicht.html).

*Initial situation:* The gross domestic product (GDP) provides information about the economic performance of a country. Due to its political importance, it has often been called the most powerful figure of human history (Lepenies, 2013). Therefore, media response to the latest release is usually very high. The GDP is embedded into national accounts that are based on internationally agreed rules. As economies continually develop, methods and concepts need to be adapted from time to time. In September 2014, national accounts in all ESS member states went through a methodological revision. The difficult task was to announce the revision at the appropriate time as well as to comprehensively inform about its extent. In Germany, the nominal GDP level rose by an average of about 3%. The major change was due to no longer defining expenditure on research and development as intermediate consumption, but as capital formation. 70% of the level increase could be explained by this asset. As national accounts should cover all economic activities without any moral judgments, illegal activities such as drug traffic and tobacco smuggling were included in the German GDP for the first time, whereas estimations on prostitution and shadow economy have been considered before.

*Media interests:* The methodological background of the GDP revision was often regarded as irrelevant, too complicated or too boring for the general public. Faced with short broadcasting times or a limited number of columns in a newspaper, it is quite understandable that the press further reduced the complexity of the topic by omitting details. However, some of these details were relevant from the expert perspective for enabling data users to evaluate the actual extent of the revision. Reducing complexity appeared to be particularly problematic if the reports did not describe the international efforts of methodological harmonization, but falsely implied that, after the European financial crisis, there were mainly political reasons for the revision (e. g., “New statistics causes the government debt ratio to fall” (Plickert, January 21, 2014) or “A new trick on debts in Euroland” (Pöpsel, January 29, 2014). Sensational phrasing was apparently seen as an effective means to arouse emotions and attract public attention for a supposedly “dry” subject. Surprisingly, this did not only apply to the tabloids, but also to prestigious business media. Too much weight was placed on secondary aspects that seemed to be an “eye-catcher.” For example, many journalists emphasized the increase in the nominal GDP level. However, this had very little impact on the more important rates of economic growth. By not mentioning the elaborate recalculations for the last two decades to ensure



comparability over time, it was suggested that Germany has been made wealthier overnight (e. g., “Why you will be richer by 1000 euros tomorrow morning” (Ettel, August 13, 2014) or “Miraculous increase” (Schrinner, August 13, 2014). As expected, many journalists put emphasis on the “funny fact” that illegal activities were included in the GDP (e. g., “Smoking pot for economy” (Hulverscheidt and Öchsner, March 25, 2014) or “Weapons, whores, coke – All that should pimp our GDP in future” (Kruse, August 14, 2014). More significance was attributed to the information provided by this type of reporting than actually pertained to the German economy.

*Tailored communication strategy:* The methodological revision had already been announced at the annual press conference in January 2014, when the press release (Statistisches Bundesamt, September 1, 2014) very briefly covered the most important reasons for the adaptations [9]. Nevertheless, the necessary technical terms in such publications sometimes make a correct interpretation difficult. Therefore, the press office, in cooperation with the subject-matter unit, organized an additional press briefing on the release day in order to further explain the methodological background [10]. Within this framework, comprehensive lectures were held. Moreover, attendees were able to ask questions and interview the specialists.

*Lessons learned:* The media play an important role in intermediating between subject-matter experts who set great store in technical correctness and the public who is usually less well-trained in statistics. The NSIs cannot prevent the press from sensational phrasing. In the selected example, the sensational phrasing did not occur as a result of a misunderstanding, but by intention. Some journalists, though, must be given credit for trying to provide an easy introduction into a difficult topic and giving extensive and correct background information about the GDP revision in the further course of their reports. Surely, this was a positive effect of the press briefing and the high number of interviews given by the subject-matter experts. In addition, it may have been beneficial if potential targets of criticism in the media had been identified in advance and an active communication strategy had been prepared as a preventive measure to weaken related

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[9] For more interested parties, detailed information on the actual changes was provided online in additional papers and tables on <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Methods/NationalAccountRevision/Revisionen2014.html>.

[10] The electronic press folder of the briefing is accessible for all data users on [https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2014/BIP\\_Revision/BIP\\_Revision\\_Uebersicht.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2014/BIP_Revision/BIP_Revision_Uebersicht.html) (only available in German).

arguments. Moreover, future communication strategies used with data users in general should explicitly refer to Destatis' overall efforts to implement a general revision policy (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016) that presents the different types of revisions and the principles behind the revision procedures. Our goal consists in providing a long-term preview as well as documenting transparently and cohesively (e. g., in a revision calendar, see Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015) that revisions are not exceptional, but rather regular events in generating official statistics (Meinke, 2016). In other words, the figures are not adjusted from time to time due to political pressure, but regularly, in order to provide high-quality statistical results that are internationally comparable. However, it might still be difficult to increase the interest of the media in the general revision policy and in methodological background information on the whole.

### **3. Working together is success**

In this paper, recommendations are offered on how to tackle tricky situations in explaining the CoP to the press, what the quality principles include and why they are beneficial for data users. Misunderstandings in the communication between the media and official statistics may arise. For example, statistical confidentiality hinders complete transparency towards data users, impartiality does not allow for exclusive stories and technical correctness does not always attract public interest. In this context, it would be desirable to intensify the exchange of experiences internally between the press office and the subject-matter units as well as internationally between the NSIs in the ESS in order to avoid such misunderstandings in the future. Within our tailored communication strategies, the following countermeasures have proven to be effective at Destatis and will be retained in our press work: seeking personal dialog with the journalists by phone, after press briefings or interviews; preparing comprehensible background information as a preventive measure as well as making timely and suitable information available to the media; facilitating immediate online access to statistical results; training journalists in effective data research; embedding the communication about ongoing changes in official statistics into the overall in-house strategy on data quality and vice versa. The following quote by Henry Ford perfectly sums up the ideal relationship between the media and official statistics: "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success."

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