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Topic: Ethics and independence

EQUAL TREATMENT, INDEPENDENCE AND TRUST: POLICY AND PRACTICE IN SN

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The principle of statistics as a common good available for everyone is a main guiding principle for Statistics Norway's dissemination policy, in which openness and transparency are central values. Two principles are important pillars; the statistics shall be professionally independent of the authorities and other parties that may have an interest in how the statistics are compiled, and all users shall be treated equally.

2. These principles are particularly important not only in relation to our owner, the Ministry of Finance, and other ministries and customers, but, and perhaps just as important – also in our relations with the media, which is the main focus of this paper. The policy of equal treatment in Statistics Norway was extended from the release of new statistics to analyses and research a few years ago. We have a strict equal treatment of users policy, which entails that no material from Statistics Norway is ever given exclusively (with embargo) to the media.

3. The equal treatment policy is considered an important part of maintaining our independence and trust in society. It is an important part of building and maintaining the confidence of Statistics Norway both in the population in general and with the authorities and the media in particular. It is an essential part of our contribution to the nation's common factual basis.

II. OPENNESS AND TRUST

4. Statistics Norway has very good media coverage. There is not a single day without coverage of our releases and publications in national and local, large and small media. Although we are criticised from time to time, our impression is that public trust in Statistics Norway is high.

5. This is confirmed by a reputation survey among public sector institutions in Norway, carried out by the opinion poll company Synovate MMI. In the most recent survey, conducted in July 2007, Statistics Norway was ranked as number ten out of 81 public institutions. 61 per cent of the population had a good or very good overall impression of Statistics Norway. Only 3 per cent of the respondents

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said that they had a “somewhat bad or very bad impression” of Statistics Norway. When asked specifically about openness and information, Statistics Norway was ranked as number four.

III. INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

6. The main channel for disseminating statistics and analysis is ssb.no. All releases and publications are made available free of charge here.

7. Our statistics releases are aimed at several target groups, but the population at large is our main focus. Therefore we do not write press releases aimed at journalists only. All releases of new statistics are written as articles for the general public and placed centrally on the front page of ssb.no, they are not press releases and we do not have a press room. We organise press conferences and seminars for the media in connection with releases and publications. But the news is always broken simultaneously at ssb.no. This does not prevent us from having a proactive media strategy and feeding media with tips and individual interviews – but this is always done after a release/publication.

8. Compared to many other NSOs, Statistics Norway is probably in the forefront regarding equal treatment of users. In *The Economist*, on 3 March 2007, in the article “Lies, damned lies” (about Britain’s coming new system of statistics), Norway was referred to as a paragon: “In Norway, the statistics office publishes figures with its own analysis, according to its own timetable. Government ministers see the information at the same time as everyone else, so they cannot mine the data for the bits that flatter them”.

IV. FROM RELEASE OF NEW STATISTICS TO ANALYSIS

9. The principle of equal treatment of users has long traditions in Statistics Norway, but has been implemented in an ever stricter way during the last decade. Over the years, the media has requested information about new statistics before release, but they have become accustomed to and respect our equal treatment policy. An example of such a request can be mentioned here: In connection with the publishing of census data in 2002, *Verdens Gang*, Norway’s largest tabloid newspaper, asked for pre-release access to the data. They offered us large headlines and eight pages of coverage in return. We refused, and published the data at ten o’clock sharp, equally available for the public and the media. What happened? *Verdens Gang* covered the census news over eight pages the following Saturday – as did a number of other newspapers.

10. Until a couple of years ago, the equal treatment policy only applied to releases of new statistics. We had a different policy for analysis and research publications, written down in our internal guidelines. We encouraged pre-release access to analysis and research to selected media. Certain journalists could get an advance copy of the publication or journal. This was based on the agreement that they could read the information and use it in their news stories, but not release the information before the ordinary release time for everyone (embargo until 10 o’clock on publication day). A way of thinking prevalent at that time was that this was a way to get good media coverage. In Statistics Norway, some argued that the media needs time and close contact with the statisticians in advance to prepare good coverage of complicated analytical material. Some large newspapers also said that they would not cover a “story” unless they got it exclusively. The views that were prevalent in Statistics Norway are also well-known in many NSOs.

11. The question of equal treatment and pre-release access can also be viewed as the battle between traditional marketing strategies and independence. Embargos and lock-ups are common ways of giving pre-release access, but do not come with a guarantee that the journalists will report the story correctly. Also, attending a lock-up is difficult for journalists who have to travel far.

12. Although the system of exclusivity was rarely used, it happened. From time to time articles from one of our journals were given exclusively with embargo to journalists in *Aftenposten*, a major

daily newspaper in Norway. However, this raised questions from a smaller newspaper who did not understand the difference between our policy for new statistics and for publications. These questions contributed to convince us that a review of the policy was necessary.

13. In 2005, we assessed our equal treatment guidelines and from 2007 we formally extended our equal treatment policy to include publications. Our users and the media did not understand why there should be a difference between releases of new statistics and publications based on more extensive analysis and research. There is also no guarantee that newspapers do not break embargos. And if the media need time to prepare coverage – let them use the time after release. Along with all other users.

V. THE CODE OF ETHICS OF THE NORWEGIAN PRESS

14. We changed our policy at a time when there was an ongoing discussion about the revision of the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press. This discussion was very interesting and relates directly to our dissemination policy, and in fact it inspired us to change it. We are talking about an important ethical question.

15. When the Code of Ethics was evaluated in 2005, a proposal from the editor of a small Norwegian left-wing newspaper, Klassekampen, was discussed. He suggested a new paragraph warning or forbidding the system of exclusivity, which is quite common in Norway. The argument for this was that with the system of exclusivity, common interests may develop between the source and the editor. Furthermore, the use of exclusivity may limit equal access for everyone, which he regarded as an ethical question. The revised Code of Ethics (November 2007) did not go as far as to forbid exclusivity, but a new paragraph did underline that particular caution should be exercised when dealing with information from sources offering exclusivity.

16. What guarantee do we have that a story is not offered exclusively in exchange for other favours, such as positive coverage or refraining from negative coverage? We are not saying that this is the purpose of offering stories exclusively, but widespread use of this practice could result in such dilemmas. Also, and perhaps more important, the system of exclusivity may raise doubts in the public mind about our independence. The public may question our motives for using this practice and whether we are compromising our independence by developing close ties to selected media. If such suspicions were allowed to get a foothold, it would be a considerable threat to the confidence in Statistics Norway.

17. Another problem that may arise from the system of exclusivity is the priority of large newspapers at the expense of smaller newspapers and national newspapers at the expense of local newspapers. The purpose of exclusivity is to ensure good coverage and publicity, which is more likely in a large, national newspaper. In our experience, however, it is not whether the media is given exclusive information that determines the coverage, but how good the information is. Media coverage of Statistics Norway is generally very good. A positive effect of our policy is that different newspapers use our statistics differently. For instance, our population statistics are adapted and presented in different ways in different local newspapers. This way our statistics reach a larger audience and become more known.

18. Although we do not give exclusive access to the statistics, we are often interviewed after the release of new statistics. Alternatively, the newspapers interview other people, for instance chief economists in Norway's largest banks to comment on the CPI development, politicians 'responsible' for the development in health services, or the man in the street who has to pay higher kindergarten fees for his children. The topic of such interviews is often decided by the focus of the different media. Thus, the coverage of new statistics may result in different focus in different newspapers.

VI. THE NORWEGIAN GOVERNMENT INFORMATION POLICY

19. Statistics Norway has its own dissemination policy, but is also a government agency. Therefore it is interesting to view our policy in light of relevant laws and regulations for Norwegian government and its agencies. The Norwegian government has an explicit information policy (from 1994, latest version 2002), which is under revision at the time being. It is based on a number of laws and policy documents based on important values such as accessibility, openness, neutrality in relation to interest groups, professional independence and equality of treatment. The Freedom of Information Act regulates the citizens' rights regarding access to documents of the public administration. Based on this, one could expect that when news from the government is announced, it would be published simultaneously for the entire population – on the Internet and in many news media.

20. In practice, however, it seems that the phenomenon of exclusivity is as prevalent as ever in Norway, some say it is increasing. It happens quite often that news is broken only in the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) and in Aftenposten, and that the press release on the government internet pages appears a few days later. Until recently there has not been much debate about this in the Norwegian media, and there is currently a debate on how the information departments of the ministries to an increasing extent give news exclusively to the main newspapers and/or NRK. This could be a result of politicians' attempts to influence press coverage.

21. One example in this respect is a newspaper article in Aftenposten in February 2008 carrying an interview with a government minister about a report on the working environment in the public sector. The main content of the report, with tables and figures, was also presented in the article. But a press release with the full report was not published on the government website until three days later. All the tables and some research findings that were used in the report were not available on the website, and still aren't. The report was made by a private consultancy firm, and the report is not available on their website either. If an equal treatment policy had been followed here, the press release should have been published first, including the report and all tables, diagrams and metadata. Then the media could have picked up the news – at the same time for everyone.

VII. FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE IN STATISTICS NORWAY

22. Implementing a dissemination policy is not something that is done overnight. It is both an ongoing and challenging process. The policy, which was set up in the communication department, will have no effect unless it is firmly rooted in the entire organisation.

23. It is the department of communication's responsibility to increase awareness of the dissemination policy. Ensuring that all staff members in the communication department are familiar with and committed to the policy was the first step towards increased awareness in the rest of the organisation. It was particularly important to make the journalists committed to the new policy. Our journalists are recruited from the media and are used to the system of exclusivity. From their perspective, it is regarded as an effective way of getting publicity. As journalists in Statistics Norway, it is important that they approach this issue from the perspective of a state institution.

24. The training has now been developed into a training course for the statisticians – to be held for the first time this spring. Developing the participants' own ability to identify practices that are in conflict with the policy is an important part of the course, especially because we have a decentralised spokesperson structure where the statisticians who have compiled the statistics also serve the media.

25. One would perhaps assume that with the extended dissemination policy in place, the need for advice and discussions would to a large extent disappear, but this is not the case. It is impossible to include all future scenarios in a policy document. There will always be new publications that differ from previous publications and require dialogue internally. An important aspect of the training is therefore to train our staff to sense when to stop and ask the right questions.

VIII. FUTURE WORK AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

26. Information sharing between government agencies is important. The use of equal treatment and no pre-release access is respected by the media and strengthens the confidence in Statistics Norway. Statistics Norway's department of communication has regular meeting with the communication departments of government ministries and agencies. We consider it important to share our experiences in these forums in order to increase equal treatment, independence and trust in general government.
