

Trust and Dissemination in Official Statistics



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Explanation of symbols

.	data not available
*	provisional figure
**	revised provisional figure (but not definite)
x	publication prohibited (confidential figure)
—	nil
—	(between two figures) inclusive
0 (0.0)	less than half of unit concerned
empty cell	not applicable
2011–2012	2011 to 2012 inclusive
2011/2012	average for 2011 up to and including 2012
2011/'12	crop year, financial year, school year etc. beginning in 2011 and ending in 2012
2009/'10– 2011/'12	crop year, financial year, etc. 2009/'10 to 2011/'12 inclusive

Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

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Trust and Dissemination in Official Statistics

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We discuss the relation between trust and statistical dissemination, drawing on examples from the Netherlands and comparing with other European countries. Dutch citizens have a fair amount of confidence in official statistics, even in the recent period of political and economic upheaval. The most important reason for this seems to be the political culture in the Netherlands, which puts a strong emphasis on rational policy making based on evaluations from scientific councils, committees and official research bureaus. We discuss how this came to be and how this influences the trust in the national statistical institute, and the consequences this has for the dissemination of statistical data.

Keywords: trust, official statistics, dissemination, evidence-based policy making

1. Introduction

Trust is an important element of a democratic society, in fact of any society based on equal relations between its citizens. Without trust a society of independent citizens cannot function and will not last long. Modern societies are complex organizations which heavily depend on information, and it is important that information of common interest can be trusted. This dependence on information is exacerbated by the fact that there are strong and complicated interrelations between different parts of society. Since official statistics are to provide the data for policy making and more generally are one of the main providers of information of common interest, trust in official statistics is important for a democratic society.

In this paper we will describe the trust of Dutch citizens in official statistics and in official policy making, and the consequences this has for the dissemination of statistical data.

2. Trust in official statistics

In the spring of 2007, the Eurobarometer of the European Commission carried out a special survey (EC, 2008) on the knowledge that Europeans have of statistical indicators of the economy. The survey focused on three major economic indicators: growth rate, inflation and unemployment, and tested the actual knowledge of European citizens and asked about their trust in these statistical figures.

2.1 Knowledge of statistical indicators

The results of this survey for the Netherlands showed

- 20 percent correctly knew the official growth rate of the Dutch economy in 2006,
- 24 percent correctly knew the official inflation rate in the Netherlands in 2006,
- 7 percent correctly knew the official unemployment rate in the Netherlands in 2006,
- 11 percent gave two or three correct answers, 28 percent gave one correct answer, and 61 percent gave no correct answers at all.

With these results, Dutch citizens appear to be slightly more knowledgeable than the average European citizen; the best informed citizens were those in Slovakia, France and Germany, where over a half of the citizens correctly knew at least one of the 3 indicators.

2.2 Importance of statistical figures

The survey also asked what European citizens about the importance they attach to economic indicators. For the Netherlands, the main results were:

- Almost one half (49 percent) disagrees with the statement that it would be necessary for them to know such figures.
- More than three quarters (77 percent) believes that actual policy decisions are actually made on the basis of statistical indicators.
- More than three quarters (77 percent) trust official statistics.

These results appear striking when compared with other European countries. For the first question, the result for the 27 countries of the European Union (EU27) as a whole, was that only 22 percent disagreed (?), and the result for the Netherlands was the highest of all countries. For the second question the result for the EU27 was 62 percent, and only for Denmark was the result higher (viz. 89 percent). For the third question the result for the Netherlands is much higher than the average of the EU27 (viz. 46 percent) and the highest of all countries. Also, in the combination of the results for these three questions, the Netherlands differs sharply from other European countries: most countries where citizens have trust in official statistics, they also tend to believe that it is necessary to know such figures; in this respect the Netherlands is very clearly an outlier.

3. Trust in official policy making

The same Eurobarometer survey showed a remarkable trust in official policy making by Dutch citizens. A full explanation of these results for the Netherlands would re-

quire an extensive analysis of Dutch society and its political culture, even more when we would try to explain the differences with other European countries. The main cause seems to be that the political culture in the Netherlands is generally regarded as one of trying to achieve consensus, the so-called ‘polder’ model of decision making; see Van Buuren and Edelenbos (2005). For example, issues on which the major political parties diverge, are often delegated for further re-search and opinion making to commissions, in which scientists often play an important role. There is also a surprisingly large numbers of official advisory boards, who advise the government on all kinds of issues. A third example is the high standing of the official bureaus for policy analysis, in particular those in the areas of economic issues, social and cultural issues and environmental issues. Almost all political parties have their election manifesto analyzed by the government bureau of economic policy analysis ; even the opposition parties appear to trust the results of such an analysis! One may say that evidence-based policy making and consensus policy making are essential elements of Dutch political culture.

4. Official statistics and evidence-based policy making

The previous two sections showed that Dutch citizens have a very high trust in official statistics as well as in official policy making, which is evidence-based and focuses on achieving consensus. These are of course not unrelated. Since evidence-based policy making is to a large extent based on official statistics, this has several implications for official statistics. First, the public must regard official statistics as undisputed; there should be no discussion as to the quality and the validity of official statistics. Secondly, official statistics should be disseminated in an impartial way. Thirdly, relations between statisticians and policy makers should be strengthened, without jeopardizing the independence of statistics. We will elaborate these implications in the next three sections.

5. Indisputability of official statistics

Official statistics should be undisputed. This does not mean that official statistics can be a black box to be believed on its nice blue eyes. On the contrary, in a modern society, transparency should be the maxim of official organizations. Thus in order to be undisputed a statistical institute has to be accountable as to the quality and the validity of its statistics. Statistics Netherlands implements this on its website (www.cbs.nl/en-GB) by means of extensive metadata that describe and document the statistical tables. Work is underway to supplement this with information on quality. Also there is a large general section on methods, which presents not only the methodological research but also the general statistical methods. These general methods are the only ones to be used in the statistical production process, and the methodological descriptions of the various tables will be rewritten so that they refer explicitly to these general methods.

6. Dissemination of official statistics

Dissemination of official statistics should be impartial and comprehensive. On the other hand, the public as well as policy makers and journalists want to be informed about the underlying developments that are reflected in the statistical tables. Both media and policy attention tend to be swayed by the issues of the day. Dissemination to everyone's satisfaction therefore looks like a mission impossible, especially in times of budget cuts forcing NSI's to do more with less. Statisticians solve this dilemma by not delving too deep in the underlying causes and by giving a balanced view of the part of society that is described by a table or a set of tables, leaving in-depth analysis to research institutes of all sorts. Usually, this works quite well, but we should be aware that this very often commits us to the mainstream of society; we should never be afraid to present things as they are, even if this is contrary to the views or interests of important groups in society or to policy makers. This opens up a great challenge for dissemination of official statistics: how to be impartial, comprehensive, accurate and nonetheless attractive, state of the art, inviting, topical and highly reactive to the needs of users. How to be attractive and still be trusted? Dissemination in the first place is about the quality of the shop window, but should stay away from window dressing. Selections have to be made from the billions of figures in our statistical databases in the contest for a shop-window nomination. Any selection of combinations of figures can be a threat to impartiality. One can't have the cake and eat it in the window. How to choose is an art in itself, however an art that must be made transparent and accountable. Optimal fulfillment of the needs of our customers requires an adequate set of antennas in society. This challenges the dissemination department, account managers and statisticians, as well as the communication department. Excellent relations with policy makers, science and the press are vital, whereas at the same time business users and the general public should be heard. Recently Statistics Netherlands has realized separate websites for the general public in their neighborhoods and for business enterprises have been, one for youngsters in the age of 12 to 14 years will follow. Official statistics must bring its audience what they're looking for. But official statistics must also bring them insights they might not yet be looking for and which may surprise them. Next years the dissemination department of Statistics Netherlands will focus on user friendliness based on user panels, user research, analysis of user behavior on websites and the like, translating needs into attractive and easy to get publications: 'Are you being served?', that's the question. Other initiatives of late and in the near future are however indispensable to serve the professional users: the scenes behind the shop window.

7. Relationship with policy makers

Policy makers and analysts are clearly a very, perhaps the most, important group of users of official statistics. In fact, many statistical institutes have been established with as aim, supplying policy making with data. Modern societies are complex and

many issues are interrelated. One cannot solve a problem in one area of society, without looking into the effects in other areas (Keuning and Zeelenberg, 2003). This makes it necessary for official statisticians to develop strong relations with policy makers and analysts. Even experienced users of statistical data often appear to miss some of the information that statistical institutes have available. In particular in a society used or committed to evidence-based policy making, policy makers and analysts cannot be indifferent to evidence, even if it seems to be contrary to the interests that they represent (Picot, 2003). However, it is important that official statisticians can hold their own in discussions with policy makers and analysts, because otherwise statistical data can too easily be used for window dressing. For this, it is necessary that they are self-confident, well trained in the tricks of the trade, such as negotiating skills, but also, and more importantly, that they are well-informed about the area of society for which they are making statistical data and in the analysis of these data. Thus analytical skills and factual and empirical knowledge are essential competences of modern official statisticians. Statistics Netherlands has responded to the need for cooperation with policy makers by establishing a Centre for Policy Statistics (CPS), which carries out research for government departments who can commission research reports from the Centre. This Centre has been very successful, growing from 6 staff members in 2002 to over 50 in 2009. Almost the whole of its operating costs are recovered from contributions by the commissioning government departments. From 2010 onwards these services will be expanded and also offered to local branches of government.

In 2010 we have established a Centre for Analytical Studies (CAS), comparable to the Analytical Studies Branch at Statistics Canada and the Analytical Services Branch at the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This Centre will publish statistical analyses of areas or problems in society that are in the current interests. The difference with the Centre for Policy Statistics is that the CAS publishes its analyses on its own initiative.

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