



How relevant is communicating with the media to National Statistical Offices: the IBGE case

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Abstract

The paper discusses how National Statistical Organizations conduct their relations with the media. Taking into account the history and sociology of statistics, The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the information disclosed by the Statistics Division of the United Nations, in addition to IBGE's own experience with the media, it analyzes the extent to which National Statistical Organizations institutionalized how to disseminate the results of their surveys to the general public.

Keywords: IBGE; embargo; media relations; official statistics.

Introduction

Although it is not clear when a Press Office was first installed at IBGE (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*, the Brazilian National Statistical Office), the dissemination for the media has always been an institutional concern for the Institute. Technological progress, Brazil's political redemocratization and the growing need for transparency were factors that contributed for IBGE to strengthen its relationship with the media.

IBGE's current Press Office's structure started to be outlined during the Census 2000 operation, when the office began to recruit and employ journalists, to increasingly invest on statistics dissemination and to build a qualified team devoted to this area. Since then the office has become very respected by media professionals, as a consequence of the serious and responsible work carried out, including how the Press Office has responded to communication crisis situations, how it has implemented the embargo policy and, finally, how IBGE has formulated and published its Integrated Communication Policy in 2013¹.

This paper, therefore, aims at describing the process of consolidating the press relations at IBGE. In order to do so, it will also draw a brief history of the relationship between statistics and the Press, starting from IBGE's creation and considering the Census milestones over time. It will also introduce the embargo policy implementation in IBGE and present a case study: the critical situation the office faced when publishing the results of the Consumer Expenditure Survey in 2004. All that concurred to making communication strategies institutional, cemented by the Integrated Communication Policy. Finally, the article will briefly report on achievements and results of the dissemination to the media.

¹IBGE (2012) at www.ibge.gov.br/home/disseminacao/eventos/missao/politica_de_comunicacao.pdf

Section 2: Historical relevance of statistical activity

“Modern Census operations require a cooperation-based relationship between the State and its citizens, where there once was a coercive relationship between the State and its vassals” (Starr, 1987, p. 12.)².

“The Press has a very important role because it is through the news that most people, including those who have been elected to be public representatives, receive statistical information” (Fellegi, 1990, p.13.).

Just like the sword was the law in ancient civilizations, statistical activities were originally imposed by force. Historical records indicate that Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese already conducted demographic Census. There are references to the Census even in the Bible (Martin, O. 2001). Knowing how many mouths were there to feed and how many arms were there to work and to fight was already strategic information in ancient societies. However, in those societies, population, agriculture and commerce surveys (which correspond to what we nowadays call statistical activity) were linked to taxation and military obligatory enrollment. Even the word Census’ etymology reveals an authoritarian bias. Censors, powerful bureaucrats in charge of counting down Roman Empire’s inhabitants, were also responsible for punishing citizens who did not behave in accordance with the established moral standards, collecting taxes and for taking care of public property³.

From Antiquity to Absolutism, statistical activity has scientifically improved and spread through a variety of subjects, but has remained the “prince’s mirror” by restricting the access to its results to those occupying the central power. That scenario would change only on Modern Age. At the dawn of democracy, France and the United States – countries who would later become role models for western nations – have appealed to statistical activity in order to legitimate their power (in the American case) or reinforce their power over aristocracy (in France’s case)⁴.

How would it be possible to define the proportional political representation of the federate states without knowing their populations? How would it be possible to ensure election’s fairness without knowing the number of voters? Census was the answer to these questions. The United States became the first nation to conduct a periodic Census, publishing its results and using them for political organization. Carried out in 1790, this first Census accomplished its goal, as stated in the American Constitution, three years earlier, allowing to determine each state’s representative’s number at the recently created Congress, as from a proportion of one congressman for each group of 30 thousand people. Legitimated by statistics, this arrangement maintained the fragile consensus that kept the former 13 colonies’ oligarchies united after Independence. Now, in France, since the “Ancient Regime”, statistical activity subsidized the State and had a bureaucratic structure of its own. French Revolution did not disregard that apparatus and, from 1791 on, French people would vote for the laws that established five-year Census⁵.

Statistical activity was, thus, more than an administrative tool. It was fundamental for democratic governments’ public acceptance and acknowledgment. Statistical survey results, broadly disseminated among the population, allowed the emergence of a “relationship based on cooperation between the State and its citizens”⁶. Therefore, the fundamental difference between statistical activity on Pre-Modern Age and the one conducted today is the publication of survey results. The prince’s mirror has become “a mirror for the nation by the nation or a mirror for society by society”⁷.

Since the end of 18th century, a group of journals published in France have become tribunes for scientific discussion regarding agriculture, economy and health. With time, publication of statistical

² All the quotes have been freely translated to English, since they were originally in Portuguese.

³ Senra (2005)

⁴ Starr (1987)

⁵ Martin (2001)

⁶ Starr (1987)

⁷ Martin (2001)

data became uneventful and took on various forms that were not necessarily directly subordinated to the State. Monopoly over the “mirror” was broken.

In the context of western society democratization, statistics gradually became public interest information. They serve central power but also favor different modern societies’ segments. Actually, demands for the adoption of certain social indicators frequently emerge from organized groups who struggle to have their identities and importance publicly acknowledged⁸.

This phenomenon would be enhanced by a powerful ally, the Press, who, since the 19th century, had become a mean of mass communication, commercially oriented and, after that an industry⁹. Important issues from major western countries would reach newspapers pages, including public discussions regarding demographic, economic, sanitary and social data. Gonzáles Bolo and Cláudia Daniel have analyzed the historic role played by newspapers in the consolidation of Argentine’s National Statistical Office, between 1890 and 1930, describing its importance in “building the social authority of official statistics”.

“The Press has become an authentic auxiliary in official statistical activity’s expansion, since has become involved in the propagation of a statistical pedagogy, settled by the State, who tried to undo social resistance to Census takers. It has also acted as a promoter of consensus over statistics’ utility and relevance, especially in the political decisions arena. The Press has been, however, a critical contributor to the extent that, sometimes, it has eroded official figures’ credibility and the authority of their producers. On one hand, it has pointed out irregularities, arbitrariness and even mistakes during the Census execution, having negatively affected the public trust on the operation. On the other hand, it has fought with state’s technical elite for the control over Census results, by claiming for itself the role of legitimate fiscal of the Census operation. (...) We can say that, from that moment on, the Press has had a central role in the consecration of Argentine statistical production’s credibility and legitimacy”. (Bollo e Daniel, 2010, p.193 e194).

Section 3: Brazilian Census and the Press

In Brazil, since August 1919, nearly three decades after the Republic’s Proclamation and after three failed population counts (in 1890, 1900 and 1910), federal capital’s newspapers begun a campaign for the execution of a Census in 1920¹⁰. After all, the country was approaching its independence centenary – which would occur in 1922 – without knowing its population size.

For weeks, countless writers speculated over the population living in Rio de Janeiro, federal capital and biggest city in the country at that time. Had we already reached the 1 million inhabitants mark, like our life-time rival, Buenos Aires? Later, after the government had finally decided to organize the Census, newspapers begun to discuss the fixed budget for the operation. With such wide repercussion in the Press, the Census took place in a very welcoming environment: “There was never a Census advertising campaign so massive and prolonged. Press had a preponderant role not only as one of the main campaigners to make the Census become decennial according to the Constitution, but also to assure it would be done properly, with very reliable results” (Santos, 2004, p.456).

Since 1936, when IBGE was created, the Institute took over the coordination role of the Brazilian Statistical System, maintaining, at the same time, a strong partnership with the Press. The Institute’s main directors and presidents would be its most active public and press relations agents¹¹. From 1940 until the end of 20th century, Brazilian Census operations continued to be broadly reported by the Press, and the Census in the new millennium¹² were, so far, no exception to this rule.

⁸ Starr (1987)

⁹ Medina (1988)

¹⁰ Senra (2009)

¹¹ Senra (2009)

¹² Although they are not the subject of this paper, the dissemination strategies adopted for the Census 2010 were detailed on a specific methodological report issued by IBGE and available at <http://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv81634.pdf> (please check chapter 16)

Brazil's redemocratization process, after the end of the military regime (1964-1985), involved deep economic reforms that initially quelled 1980's and 1990's hyperinflation and, later, in the years 2000, cut down unemployment rates and restored worker's income level. Thus, inflation indexes, unemployment rates, Gini coefficient, GDP variations and worker's income level, among other statistical figures calculated by IBGE, have been constantly in evidence in the news and at the center of passionate electoral debates throughout the country's recent history.

During the preparation for the Census 2000 operation, IBGE's Press Office team was renewed, substantially increasing its power of dialogue with the Press. Furthermore, employee turnover in the area was reduced by improving recruitment and the creation of permanent job vacancies for journalists which enabled the Press Office to establish strategic long-term goals. Also, at that same time, Internet became available to most Brazilian companies and government institutions, and national media started to get broad and real-time access to official statistics¹³.

Further details on this renovation successful process and its assimilation by the Brazilian media are addressed by Fonseca (2005)¹⁴. The author, in addition to interviewing journalists who actively participated on IBGE's news releases, also depicts and analyzes the adoption of an internationally notorious tool used in the dissemination of statistical information to the media: the embargo.

Section 4: The embargo and the 2004 Consumer Expenditure Survey

The prior release of embargoed statistical information to the Press, under a secrecy commitment until they are officially published, is a practice adopted by a series of international institutions and National Statistical Offices in the world, including those in the USA, France, Denmark and Portugal and also by the Eurostat. In Brazil, embargo is performed by institutions such as Fundação Getúlio Vargas (Getúlio Vargas Foundation - FGV), Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas Aplicadas (Institute for Applied Economic Research - IPEA), and national branches of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International Labour Organization (ILO)¹⁵.

The embargo period allows media to bring forth more elaborated news stories, even entire special sections of newspapers, websites or magazines about the subjects in case, which, without the extra time given, would probably be treated in a more superficial and even hasty way. The embargo strategy would be in line with an argument by De Vries (1999), regarding the fourth principle of official statistics, avoiding their misapplication and mistaken interpretations.

All of these changes concurred for a noticeable improvement on IBGE's prominence. The Office does not normally dispose of an advertising budget, unless during Census operations. So it is primarily through the Press that companies and citizens get acquainted with the Institute and its work.

Nevertheless, this increased visibility ended up entailing a difficult situation in December 2004, after the release of the Consumer Expenditure Survey results. The fresh published anthropometric data analysis denied the old stereotype of famine in the country's deserted northeast areas, which had subsisted since the beginning of the 20th century in our society common sense and also in the academic debate. According to the survey, following standards established by the World Health Organization (WHO), overweight prevalence and obesity were now a bigger problem for Brazilian population than the supposed high prevalence of low weight.

The published data certainly received a great deal of attention, leading to a series of criticism from opposition parties to *Fome Zero*, at the time a newly launched federal program to fight starvation, which, in turn, was president Lula's election flagship. The government stood up for its program by

¹³ Fonseca (2005)

¹⁴ Statistics in the News – IBGE Statistics Dissemination through the Journalists Point of View, ENCE/ IBGE, Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

¹⁵ Bello (2013)



publicly questioning the survey results. However, after actively participating in the data embargo, journalists were fully aware of the details of the survey methodology and went on to endorse IBGE. Federal government spent, therefore, more than a week being fiercely criticized by the media¹⁶ that showed their trust and support on the National Statistical Office work and statistical outputs.

At that time, the embargo period varied, lasting from two to seven days prior to the official data release, depending on the survey. Federal government received the figures only two hours before the release. However, after all the criticism from the Press following the release of the Consumer Expenditure Survey results, the major standpoint in Brasília¹⁷ was that the government was in disadvantage in relation to the Press on what concerned IBGE's data releases.

Following these events, in January 2005, dissemination routines at IBGE became a subject of public debate, involving Press, congressmen and the Ministry of Planning, Budget and Management (MPOG). Finally, these routines were regulated by ministerial ordinances¹⁸ that established a 48-hour precedence to the federal government for most of IBGE's surveys (except those that produce short term indicators). Therewith, in those cases, data embargoes for the Press were also restricted to a 48-hour period prior to official releases. Even though the ordinances have initially aroused some suspicion of government interference in Brazil's National Statistical Office, they ended up making dissemination to media procedures institutional, since they were, until then, performed without any written regulation, even though in an organized and safe manner¹⁹.

Conclusions: 99 news stories per day

IBGE is one of the governmental institutions with more presence in the national media. In 2013, 35,965 news were spotted in Brazilian newspapers and magazines about the Institute and its work was clipped, with a daily average of 99 news stories. On TV, IBGE has appeared 1,609 times – an average of four news per day. At the same year, IBGE performed 196 releases, more than 50% of which were made by means of press conferences.

IBGE's Press Office, with the assistance of the Institute state branches, has answered 4,867 requests from journalists, including 965 interview demands. There were about 20 requests per working day, more than 80% of which were answered at the same day. At the end of 2014, IBGE's profile at Twitter²⁰ has approximately 85 thousand followers, with a monthly growth rate of almost a thousand followers. At the same year, the Institute's Internet portal²¹ reached 41.7 million visits or 2.7 million visits per month.

It is important to highlight that in most of the news stories featuring IBGE or its work, the Institute appears as a reliable source of information used by journalists to debate over public policies and the country's socio and economic situation. If in the 90's, many surveys conducted by the Institute were discussed mainly in the academic environment, nowadays the most important details of these surveys reach almost every citizen's home, through TV news. It is preserved, thus, for almost 80 years, IBGE's commitment with assuring that Brazilian society will have access to statistical information that are increasingly strategic to inform the government and citizens' decisions.

¹⁶ Bello (2013)

¹⁷ Brasília is the capital of Brazil.

¹⁸ Ordinance nº 15, 27th January 2005. Diário Oficial [República Federativa do Brasil], Brasília, DF, nº 20, 28.01.2005, section 1 at www.ibge.gov.br/home/disseminacao/eventos/missao/portaria_estrutural.shtm.

¹⁹ Bello (2013)

²⁰ @ibgecomunica

²¹ www.ibge.gov.br



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