

Discussion comments on session STCPM28: Statistics dissemination public service

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The purpose of this session was to share the experiences of various statistical institutions with respect to the dissemination of statistics to the public. Subjects of particular interest included online access to statistics and the development of interactive statistical databases.

My comments focus on four of the papers presented, namely those by Salou, Dembiermont, Díaz Muñoz, and Dziobek and Tanase.

I shall first summarise each of the papers, and then identify key themes and discuss them further.

The ECB Statistical Data Warehouse – improving data accessibility for all users, by Gérard Salou

This paper discusses an online data delivery service developed by the ECB. The Statistical Data Warehouse (SDW) aims to deliver high-quality, timely statistics on the euro area to users with varying needs.

The paper starts with a description of the content of the SDW and the data and metadata model used. The SDW contains economic, financial and monetary statistics published by the ECB and Eurostat that are relevant to monetary policy. The system uses the SDMX standard data model which enables users to locate, retrieve, transform, understand, present and analyse data.

The paper then proceeds to discuss users – in particular how features of the SDW have been developed to meet varying needs. A key objective of the SDW was to develop a user interface that facilitated users' access to statistics, regardless of their level of knowledge of euro area statistics or technology. The ECB worked in close collaboration with users to ensure that this objective was met. The introduction of the SDW has been accompanied by a surge in the frequency of access and usage of euro area statistics, from an average of 200 users per month to a current average of 20,000 users.

The paper concludes with a brief comment on future developments including, the introduction of interactive graphs on the home page. The intention is to continue developing the system in response to user needs.

Thirty years of experience in database management: the BIS Data Bank, by Christian Dembiermont

This paper summarised 30 years of database design, development and management at the BIS.

It starts off by describing the importance of high-quality data in the decision making process – the factor that motivated the BIS to develop the BIS data bank.

The main objective of the BIS data bank is to provide a common database owned, updated and controlled by the central bank community, allowing the data bank to be developed and evolve over time to meet the needs of central bankers around the globe.

Forty-one countries currently contribute to the BIS data bank. This requires a high degree of coordination by the BIS, as well as the use of efficient processes to ensure that users of the data bank receive timely, high-quality data.

There are challenges in delivering database services such as the BIS data bank. The paper discusses a few of these challenges, including ensuring data reliability, delivering timely data, motivating central banks to contribute to the data bank and “competing” with an increasing number of data providers.

The challenge of disseminating European statistics, by Pedro Diaz Munoz

This paper discusses the importance Eurostat places on the dissemination of timely, high-quality European data. It also discusses the challenges Eurostat faces in achieving this.

Eurostat is involved in the design, collection, production and dissemination of European Statistics. These statistics are mostly collected by National Statistical Organisations (NSOs), according to standards developed at a European Union level and spelt out in legal acts, and are disseminated by both Eurostat and individual NSOs.

The paper summarises the Eurostat dissemination policy, which was revised at the beginning of 2004. The basic principles are that:

- Information is available to all users at the same time and under the same conditions.
- All statistical data should be disseminated free of charge.
- The main vehicle for statistical dissemination is the web.
- Printed papers continue to be a vehicle for dissemination.
- Cooperation within the European Statistical System should enhance the dissemination of statistical information.

The objective of ensuring that decision makers are provided with correct and timely information needed to make high-quality decisions is a challenging one. The paper contains a useful discussion on some of these challenges, including:

- Delivering timely data.
- Providing efficient global access to a significant volume of data.
- Making metadata and contextual information available to users to ensure appropriate use of statistics.
- Understanding and balancing the needs of various types of users.

The paper concludes with a comment on ongoing projects related to dissemination, which include the standardisation of data and metadata models, ongoing improvement in data display and access, and improvements in search engines.

Institutional arrangements for producing macroeconomic statistics in countries subscribing to the special data dissemination standard (SDDS), by Claudia Dziobek and Florina Tanase

This paper presented results from a survey of countries that adhere to the IMF Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS) on their macroeconomic statistics dissemination arrangements.

The survey covered 41 countries with well developed statistical systems. It found that a multiple institutional approach to statistical dissemination of macroeconomic statistics was the most popular model, with NSOs taking the overall lead.

The multiple institutional approach makes cooperation and coordination between institutions (e.g. NSOs and central banks) essential. Statisticians have a responsibility to manage data requests and to attempt to minimise their impact on providers. Thus, it is essential for organisations responsible for producing and disseminating macroeconomic statistics to work together. Coordination also helps to ensure that macroeconomic statistics remain relevant and are consistent.

The survey also highlighted the importance of well defined legal frameworks as an important basis for the integrity and professional independence of statistical agencies, and therefore an important part of ensuring that statistics are a public good.

Key themes

The importance of understanding your user

A theme running through all of the papers was the importance of understanding your user. Users are not homogeneous and often have different, and sometimes competing, needs. One user may be willing to sacrifice timeliness for accuracy, while another requires data as soon as possible. One user may simply want a headline number, while another needs access to microdata.

Designing one dissemination tool that meets a variety of needs can be a challenging project. Each of the organisations presenting papers have embraced this challenge and successfully implemented systems that do just this.

In addition to supplying data the BIS paper mentions the role that these systems play in bridging the gap between the provider and the user – in some cases, in a translation role.

Statistical institutions around the world have started to use tools such as audience modelling and personas, to better understand their users. These types of tools can be used to assess the usefulness of new products. Better understanding of the users makes it possible to design and develop products that more effectively meet their needs.

Metadata are essential

Metadata are the glue that holds a statistical database together, giving data a context, making them valuable and ensuring that they are used appropriately.

The papers emphasised how essential it is to have good metadata frameworks in place when attempting to design and implement efficient statistical databases. Documentation on methodology, classifications and commentary are examples of metadata that enhance data for users. The use of this type of information will be driven by users' needs. Ensuring that highly technical users' needs are met, without overburdening the general user with information, can be a challenge.

Technology is an enabler

Technology has enabled us to disseminate statistics globally, to provide access to data that in the past may have resided in volumes in a library. The papers presented illustrate how statisticians have built on technological advances to better meet the needs of users.

However, technology continues to evolve, and this can create expectations. Users expect timely, accurate information at their fingertips. The dissemination practices of statisticians need to evolve in tandem.

Cooperation and collaboration

A number of papers highlighted the importance of working together to ensure that statistics are disseminated in a user-friendly, efficient and timely manner. This may involve working more closely with international agencies, NSOs, central banks and users.