Managing Internet in a Statistical Institution

Leon Østergaard, Statistics Denmark

Summary

Internet, Web, Organization, Management, Governance, Statistics

The many exciting possibilities of communicating statistics on the Internet have attracted a lot of attention among National Statistical Institutions (NSI's), and for a span of years NSI's have been busy exploring these possibilities. Less attention has been focused on the way, Internet activities are organized inside the NSI, despite the fact that there are considerable variations among countries in this area. In some NSI's, for instance, Internet management is an integral part of the communication division, whereas in others the Internet is regarded as inherently an IT-matter.

The paper presents results of an international survey on management and governance of Internet activities in NSI's. One conclusion is that Internet governance is not necessarily a result af deliberate choice but in many NSI's rather a matter of organizational culture and coincidences. The paper argues that some ways of organizing Internet governance in a NSI are preferable to others, primarily because they give better posibilities of coordination and professionalization.

1. Introduction

Organizational issues have been the subject of considerable interest in the statistical world for a number of years. Among the issues discussed have been the pros and cons of the so-called functional organization, where data collection is centralized in a special organizational unit. But other organizational issues, as well, have been the focus of attention at international gatherings in the statistical field.

Until recently there has been no interest in the question on how to organize communication in a statistical institution. This has changed, however, with the UNECE Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication in Geneva, 13-15 May 2008, where for the first time a session was dedicated to "Managing communication and dissemination".

There are several possible explanations for the lack of attention up till now. You might be led to believe that the topic has simply not been considered important, as communication might only be regarded as a peripheral activity in a statistical institution. This is contradicted, however, by the importance publicly attached to communication by the top management of central NSIs.

An alternative speculation is that it might simply be the case that there is only one sensible way of organizing and governing communication in a NSI, and that this model has been intuitively implemented by most modern institutions. This, however, is not the case, as a paper (Østergaard, 2008) at the aforementioned Work Session showed that there are great variations in the ways of organizing communication, even among closely related and neighbouring national statistical institutions.

The purpose of this paper will be to further contribute to the discussion on various ways of organizing and governing communication in National Statistical Institutions with a special emphasis on the way Internet activities are organized.

2. Communication tasks in statistical institutions

There are several kinds of communication tasks commonly carried out in statistical institutions. Some tasks generally encountered are listed below:

- Communication and publishing strategy

- Building and improving websites
- Editing websites
- Building and improving databanks
- Uploading data in databanks
- Editing news releases
- Monitoring and servicing the media
- Editing publications
- Carrying out user surveys
- Managing intranet

Even if most of these communication tasks are carried out by most NSI's, they are by no means always the overall responsibility of the communication division. As the paper will show, responsibility for these tasks may be shared between two or more organizational units. This goes for internet activities as well.

The reason for this may be a conscious choice by the organization. For many of these institutions, however, the organization of communication and internet activities is not necessarily a result of a conscious choice but rather of the historical development and organizational culture of the institution. This claim is supported by public relations research in government institutions, in general, and by the authors experience of national statistical institutions in particular. The next section will give an overview of some data from the statistical field supporting the conclusion.

3.   Managing Internet in statistical institutions

For the UNECE Work Session on the Communication and Dissemination of Statistics 13-15 May 2009 in Warsaw, Poland, each participating organization had to prepare in advance a status report on the different topics of the work session. One of these topics was Managing Communication, hence each of the 28 participating organizations had to forward an organizational chart and describe challenges, issues and lessons learned in this area. These "organization reports" were collated and published by the UNECE Secretariat (UNECE 2009).

The organization reports, of course, are quite different in scope and content, and from some of them it is not possible to conclude on the organization of internet- and communication activities in the institution. Hence, this information has had to be supplemented with visits at the corporate websites of the statistical institutions, personal experience and other sources. Anyway, the data should be sufficient to create an overview of the situation.

In most of the participating 28 institutions, Internet activities seem to be an integral part of the communication division. In 7 of the institutions, however, databanks appear to be not a part of the communication division, in 2 institutions the website seems to fall outside the responsibility of the communication division, and in a further 2 institutions neither databanks, nor website are the responsibility of the general communication division.

In a further 5-10 instances it is difficult to conclude from the available information, but the fact that more than a third of the statistical institutions have separated (part of) their Internet activities from the general communication activities seems surprising in itself. At a time where Internet communication emerges as the most important tool for the dissemination of statistics, this must be contrary to expectations.

This way of organising Internet activities may be the result of a conscious choice. In my experience, however, quite often it is not a deliberate choice but rather a result of the way Internet activities evolved in statistical institutions. To discuss this, we will have a closer look at the way Internet activities have developed in institutions - including statistical institutions
.

4.   Development of Internet activities in statistical institutions

In the "good old days" before the Internet, communication was often regarded as a kind of corporate service to the subject matter divisions, rather like IT and Human Resources. Communication tasks consisted mainly in disseminating the statistics put out by the subject matter division. Hence the division responsible for this might as well be named Dissemination Division. Graph 1 shows a typical organizational chart for this type of institution. A variation on this model could be that the responsibility for media contacts was placed with the staff close to the General Director. The reason for this would be that media relations were regarded as too important strategically to be handled by staff not part of the top management.

Graph 1 Typical organization before the Internet age
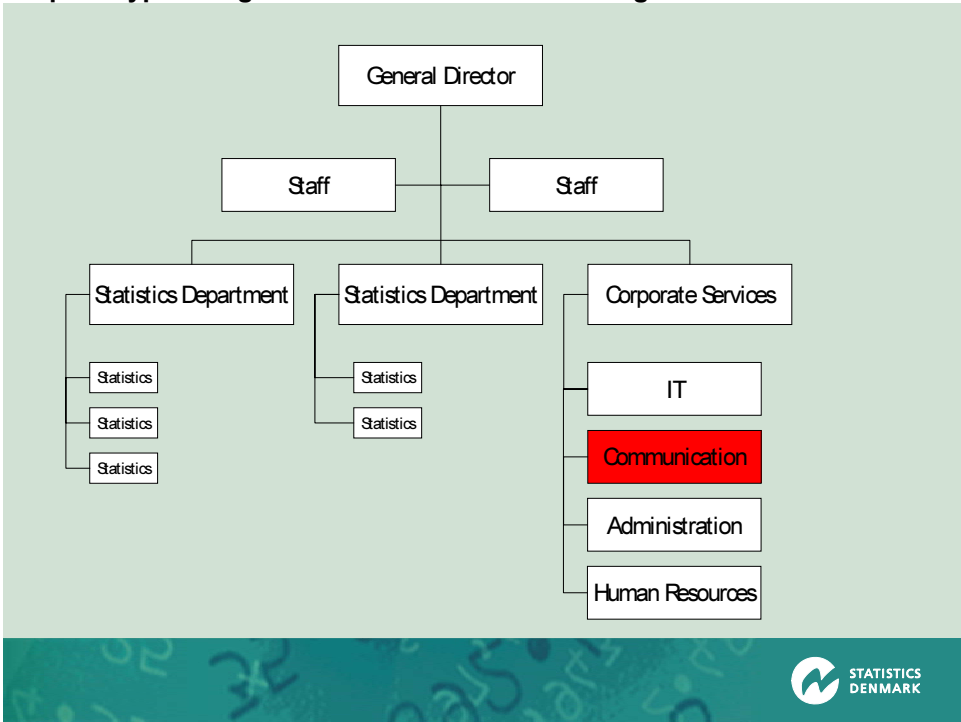
When during the 1990'ies the Internet started to gain interest among institutions, the employees most likely to catch interest was the IT-people. The reason for this was of course that in the early days the Internet was highly technical in nature and it was difficult for non-technical staff to use it and get an understanding of its possibilities. Hence in many institutions the first generation website was developed entirely by the IT-Services without much interference from the Communication Division. Graph 2 shows a typical organizational chart of that period.

**Graph 2 Internet growing out of IT-Services**
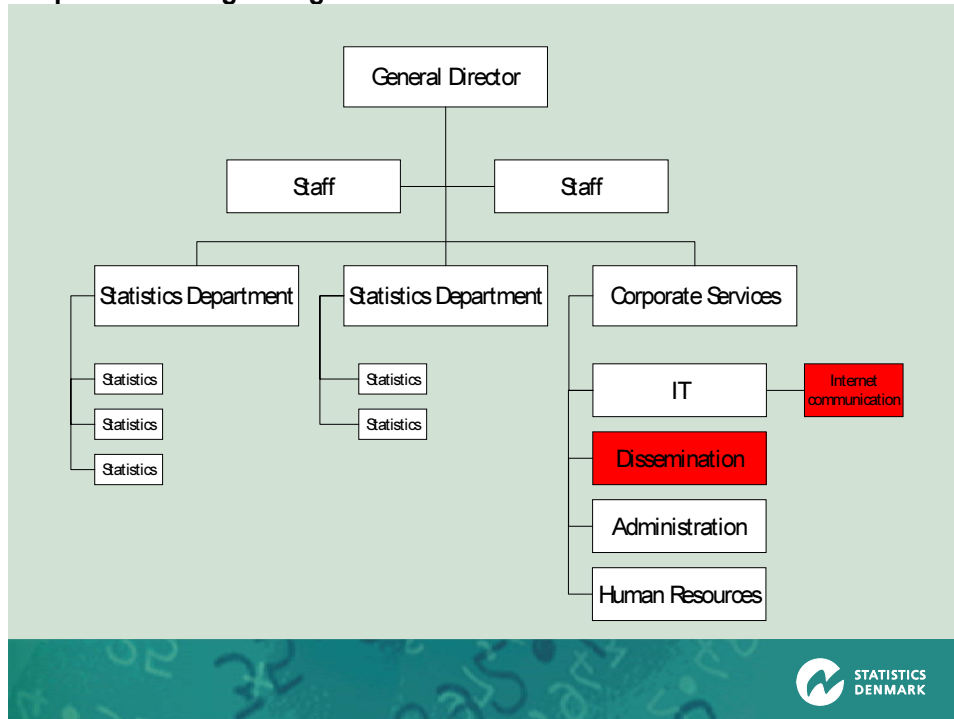
As the Internet came of age, it gradually became easier to manage and use also for non-technical staff, and in most statistical institutions the communication staff started to take an interest in the possibilities shown by this new medium. This often started an internal discussion on the organizational whereabouts of this new phenomenon.

The Communication Division would argue that the Internet was just another new medium and as such should be handled by the division already responsible for the other channels of communication. Of course it demanded support from the IT-Services but that was not different from a lot of other internal tools. In the majority of statistical institutions this resulted in management decisions on moving the responsibility for the website from IT to Communication. Graph 3 shows a typical organizational chart after this decision

As for the databanks, the situation might be a bit different. If a statistical institution has developed online databanks it is often felt that this is highly technical of nature. In many cases there are not any integration between the online databanks and the website. Hence even if it is decided to move responsibility for the website to Communication, the online databanks are not necessarily transferred as well but may stay with the IT-Services or be placed somewhere else in the organization.

Graph 3 Internet moved to Communication Division
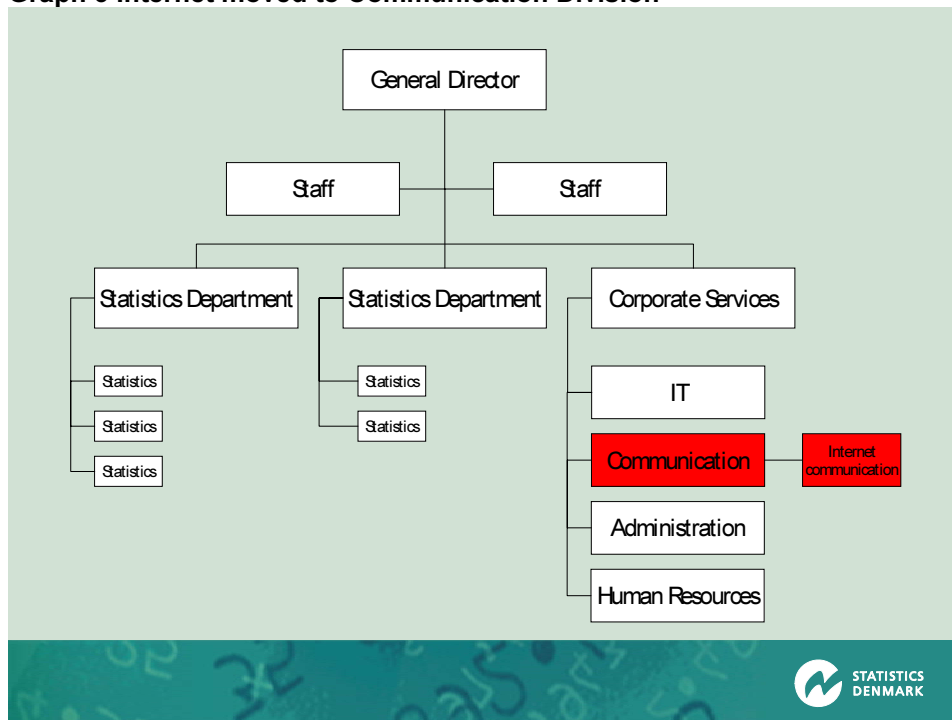
5.   Where should Internet activities be placed in an organization?

It is true, of course, that Internet activities are dependent on support from the IT division. But so are a lot of other activities in a statistical institution. Among communication professionals today there is no doubt that Internet is a medium alongside the traditionally known. Hence the responsibility for Internet activities should rest with the communication division.

There are many arguments for this. The most important is that the Internet today is an integral part of almost all traditional communication activities. If you write a press release, it is published on the website. If you produce a Yearbook, it is placed for download on the website and you may advertise it on the front page.

But what about online databanks? Does the same argument hold for them? In my opinion, yes. Even if they are highly technical of nature, in reality they are just another communication medium. If we want ordinary people to be able to use our online databanks, we must stop looking upon them as technical gadgets and start putting some communication knowledge into them! They do not necessarily have to be cumbersome to use if we develop them, starting to look upon them from the user's perspective. Likewise we have to integrate the online databanks with our website in order to ease the burden of updating figures on our website. Automatic updating from our online databanks should be the normal thing on our website.

Another argument for integration of the Internet is that this makes it possible to create a professional communication environment in the institution. Professional communicators is a scant resource in the institution and instead of having them split up in different small divisions, by joining them you could gain some synergy and take on larger development projects.

6.   Further organizational developments

There is an in-built dilemma in organizing communication in organizations where communication is an appreciable part of the work of the organization. This is due to the fact that communication will most

likely be of strategic importance to the institution. Hence the top management will want to place the unit responsible for this close to itself. But on the other side there is a limit to the size of this kind of staff unit, if it has to keep close to top management. More than 4-5 employees seem to be the limit.

In organizations like say industrial manufacturing, communication is just a small part of the job, and the - naturally small - communication unit may easily be placed at staff level close to the top management. But in organisations where communication is a sizeable part of the job - like in statistical institutions - the communication unit will easily be so big, that it is not possible to place it at top level. Several solutions have been sought to this problem - not only in statistical institutions but in other knowledge-heavy organizations as well.

One possible way would be to split up the communication division in the strategic activities and the more operational activities. The "strategic part" - media relations etc. - could then be placed as a small unit close to top management and the remaining activities at a lower organizational level. The evident problems with this approach are of course that you loose synergy between media relations and the rest of the communication activities, which will not be able to contribute to strategic communication goals.

Another way would be to let the communication division remain at the organizational level shown in Graph 3, but incorporate other changes to make the division able to act strategically. This is the solution chosen in Statistics Denmark, where the Head of Communication in strategic matters are referring directly to the General Director but in operational matters to the Director of Corporate Services. Besides, the Head of Communication participates in all meeting of the Management Board, putting him in a position to closely follow and influence the strategic aims of the institution.

A third way may be to realize that communication today is such a large share of the activities of the statistical institution, that it should have Department of its own, alongside the statistical departments. Graph 4 shows how this looks in an organizational chart. In this way the Director of Communication would be part of the Board of Management of the institution. This is the solutions chosen at Statistics Norway and Statistics Sweden, having at the same time added a few other functions to get the size of the department right. In Norway the Director of Communication is responsible for human relations as well.

Graph 4 Mature organizational chart
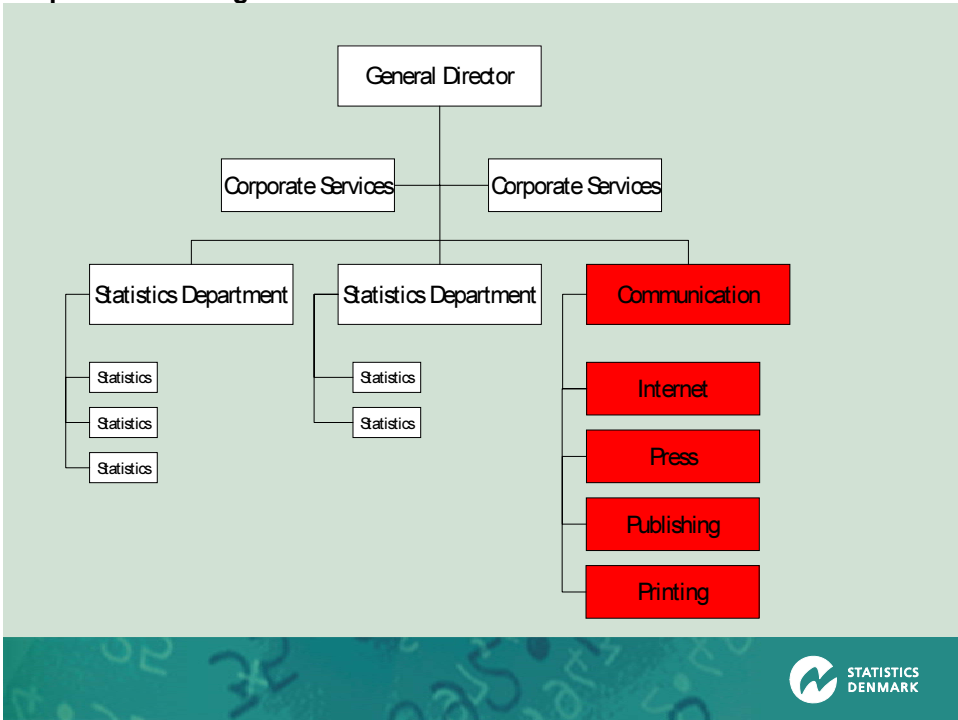
References

1. UNECE Work Session on the Communication and Dissemination of Statistics 13-15 May 1990: *Organization Reports, Warsaw*, 1990
2. Østergaard, Leon: *Governance Models for Communication in Statistical Institutions, UNECE Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication, Geneva,* 13-15 May 2008