



Press release

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0 Basic statistical data and overviews

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Trust in data in the era of fake news

The important role of official statistics in a world of fact, fiction and everything in between

Neuchâtel, 4 April 2018 (FSO) – **Facts provide the foundation for political and social dialogue. But what happens when instead of facts, purposely spread untruths begin to dominate that dialogue? And what can be done about it, or better still, what can be done to stop it? Possible answers can be found at the conference entitled “Truth in numbers – the role of data in a world of fact, fiction and everything in between” that highlights the importance of official statistics for democracy. The conference is organised by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the international Partnership in Statistics for Development PARIS21.**

Attending the conference are various stakeholders from the worlds of politics, the economy, media, civil society and international organisations. Discussions have focused on the influence of fake news and filter bubbles on official statistics and how to better manage the misuse of data. The discussion was started by Professor Vincent F Hendricks, Head of the Center for Information and Bubble Studies of the University of Copenhagen. Director General of the FSO Georges-Simon Ulrich, Head of Statistics, BBC News, Robert Cuffe, former Statistician General of Statistics South Africa Pali Lehohla and Professor Hendricks discussed how to tackle this problem. Also considered was the role of data in implementing the UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development and how statistical data can lend momentum to the agenda.

Post-truth vs. fact-based reality

A democracy finds itself in a post-truth situation when assertions that are politically advantageous, but factually misleading, are used as the basis for political debate, opinion making and legislation. Populist statements, alternative facts and fake news have muscled their way into public debate. Disinformation has become so widespread that everyone is affected by it – politicians, media representatives and ordinary citizens. In this information age, the ability to command attention is as valuable as money, power and influence, even when it happens at the expense of facts.

Traditionally, governments have held control of what constitutes “official statistics” and of their production. But in a post-truth environment, there is no guarantee of legitimacy and the proliferation of non-official data providers such as cooperation projects, private companies and NGOs, has led to the information market being flooded with data that is often unchecked and of dubious quality. Official statistics will be called into question more often. National statistical systems that collect, anonymise, analyse and disseminate statistics on behalf of governments will need to be more proactive in their communication with the general public. Furthermore, thought should be given to a global awareness campaign to boost data literacy and to establish regulations for the new information market.

What has this got to do with Switzerland?

The Swiss statistical system is based on the principles of official statistics and supplies all relevant stakeholders with free access to the information needed for a democratic dialogue. For more than 150 years, the FSO has been providing reliable information to the Federal Administration, the media, the economy and the civil society. This all takes place in accordance with official statistics rules (UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the European Statistics Code of Practice and the Charter of Swiss Official Statistics). Switzerland is actively integrated into both the European and global statistics system and delivers comparable statistics.

The world of data has undergone radical change in recent years: Big Data and other new data sources are now available. Furthermore, society is becoming increasingly digitalised, leading to an explosive increase in the amount of data available. Today the FSO is faced with growing competition from private data producers. The producers of official statistics, however, have the advantage of being able to ensure that data are representative - guaranteeing their reliability, comparability, and impartiality.

But the way data are used also depends on how users read, understand and process them. The FSO is fully engaged in this dialogue and wants to understand the questions that are being asked. The FSO should be the first point of contact for statistics and have answers to those questions. The FSO is ready to take an active part in this dialogue.

FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE
Media Office

Post-truth – The new reality in a time of “bullshit”, fake news and conspiracy theories

Vincent F. Hendricks, Professor at the University of Copenhagen and Head of the Center for Information and Bubble Studies writes about the developments that led to a post-truth democracy and enumerates the winners and losers in this new attention-seeking economy. The latest publication from Vincent F. Hendricks and Mads Vesergaard ‘Postfaktisch - Die neue Wirklichkeit in Zeiten von Bullshit, Fake News und Verschwörungstheorien’ offers a related analysis of the mechanisms that make us consider or feel that something is true. The publication serves as a wake-up call at a time when the “truth” seems increasingly to be a matter of how many clicks can be obtained.

It is time for users to claim ownership of their data, to reclaim their digital authority and renegotiate the conditions surrounding their digital citizenship on social media. Laws are being put in place, for instance in the EU, such as the amendment to the General Data Protection Regulation. From May 2018, this intends to protect social media users and not the social media companies themselves. As long as you continue to behave like a casino player, under current circumstances you will lose in the end. We must either start changing the model or stop playing; in any event official statistics will be needed to make a qualified decision.

PARIS21 in brief

The partnership in statistics for development in the 21st century (PARIS21), promotes the better use and production of statistics throughout the developing world. Since its establishment in 1999, PARIS21 has successfully developed a worldwide network of statisticians, policymakers, analysts, and development practitioners committed to evidence-based decision making. The main objective of PARIS21 is to achieve national and international development goals and reduce poverty in low and middle income countries. It facilitates statistical capacity development, advocates the integration of reliable data in decision-making and co-ordinates donor support for statistics.

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Information about the conference: <http://www.paris21.org/news-center/events/conference-truth-numbers-role-data-world-fact-fiction-and-everything-between>

Information about the Center for Information and Bubble Studies: <http://bubblestudies.ku.dk/>

Information about the General Data Protection Regulation: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679&from=DA>

Online:

Further information and publications: www.bfs.admin.ch/news/en/2018-0546
Statistics counts for you. www.statistics-counts.ch
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