

Truth in numbers

The role of data in a world of fact, fiction and everything in between

Wednesday, 4 April 2018

Kursaal Bern Conference Centre; Room Sopra Grande
Bern, Switzerland

New information technologies have resulted in the current “post-truth” digital era, where the spread of “fake news” through social media and complex algorithms have led to divisive virtual echo chambers and information bubbles of like-minded people. Polarised opinion landscapes and widespread misinformation have formed in an environment where emotions and beliefs prevail over facts and evidence.

Against this background, there is a growing consensus among policy makers that *something* needs to be done to regulate the new data ecosystem, educate citizens and limit the misuse of data and information.

In today’s fragmented information landscape, this conference will look at the role of official statistics and data in making true and reliable information available to society and encouraging the use of facts and evidence by citizens.

08:30 – 09:00 Welcome Tea/Coffee (Foyer Sopra)

09:00 – 09:15 **I. Welcome**

- **Georges-Simon Ulrich**, Director General, Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO)
- **Johannes Jütting**, Manager, PARIS21

09:15 – 09:45 **II. Opening remarks: Global issues that require global solutions**

- **Krystyna Marty Lang**, Deputy State Secretary, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)
- **Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu**, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLS)

09:45 - 10:15 III. Keynote on Fake News, Bubbles and Official Statistics

New technologies have opened the door for a new form of information society. They have also encouraged the polarised opinion landscapes we witness today through discussion forums, blogs and crowd-based opinion aggregators. Are we better off as a result? Professor Hendricks's keynote will analyse how information may be used to improve the quality of personal decisions and group think, while warning against the informational pitfalls of modern information technology. Central to this debate, data and statistics can be perceived as methodologically rigid, falling behind their expected objective of informing individual and policy decisions. Acknowledging the changes brought in the data landscape, Prof. Hendricks will discuss how arguments, and not opinions, can be brought back into the public debate to restore data's looked-after relevance.

- **Vincent F. Hendricks**, Professor, University of Copenhagen and Director, Centre for Information and Bubble Studies (30 min)

10:15 – 10:45 Discussion Q&A

10:45 - 11:15 Networking Tea/Coffee (Foyer Sopra)

11:15 – 12:15 IV. Panel discussion: How to better manage and tackle the misuse of data and information in the digital era

As information bubbles highlight the need for better understanding how citizens think critically about data and information, there is a growing consensus among policy makers that *something* needs to be done. This panel discussion will bring experts (government, academia, civil society, private sector) from different sectors to discuss the way in which official statistics can provide solutions to today's fragmented information landscape. From improving how data and statistics are presented in public debates, to building a legal framework to reduce knowledge spillovers and building partnerships with key sectors in data production, the panel will aim at re-defining roles and priorities to combat the misuse of data.

Topics for discussion:

- If the costs of misinformation become higher in society, what actions can governments, the private sector and civil society take today?
- Can new regulations (e.g. General Data Protection Regulation) improve the current environment of misinformation? Should regulation tackle social media companies entering the "data" and "news" business?
- Educating citizens on the critical use of data is an essential step to control bubbles. What actions need to be taken in this direction (e.g. data literacy)?

Moderator: Marie-José Kolly, Data Journalist, Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) (Swiss newspaper)
Panellists:

- **Georges-Simon Ulrich**, Director General, FSO
- **Vincent F. Hendricks**, Professor, University of Copenhagen
- **Robert Cuffe**, Head of Statistics, BBC News
- **Pali Lehohla**, Independent Accountability Panel (former Statistician General of Statistics South Africa)

12:15 – 12:45 Discussion Q&A

12:45 - 12:55 **V. Key takeaways from the morning**

- **Johannes Jütting**, Manager, PARIS21

12:55 - 14:30 *Networking Lunch – provided for all participants (Foyer Sopra)*

14:30 – 14:50 **VI. Role of data in SDG implementation**

- **Michael Gerber**, Ambassador, Swiss Special Envoy for Global Sustainable Development
- **Francesca Perucci**, Assistant Director, UN Statistics Division

14:50 – 15:30 **VII. Calling out bullsh*t in a digital world****

Presenter: Jevin West, Assistant Professor, University of Washington

The world is full of “bullshit”. A deluge of information, news, “facts” and cat memes are thrown at us 24/7. Sifting through this will become as much of a critical skill as learning the multiplication tables.

This session will look at how to identify “bullshit” and ultimately how to combat it with effective critical thinking, analysis and argument.

** Based off of the UW course on “Calling Bullshit: Data Reasoning in a Digital World”. *Bullshit is language, statistical figures, data graphics, and other forms of presentation intended to persuade by impressing and overwhelming a reader or listener, with a blatant disregard for truth and logical coherence.*

15:30 - 15:45 *Networking Tea/Coffee (Foyer Sopra)*

15:45 – 16:00 **VIII. Greetings by Alec von Graffenried, Mayor of Bern**

16:00 – 16:45 IX. Panel discussion. Data for Development: the role of official statistics within the new information landscape

The value of data in enabling development is uncontested. Still, we observe worrying gaps and low capacity in developing countries to produce, and to manage, data for policy making. Building statistical capacity involves not only improving data production but also empowering NSOs to play a more prominent role in facilitating data use, improving data quality control and educating citizens on data use. This session will explore the gaps to attain these objectives, and the necessary endowments for official data producers to comply with this enlarged role.

Topics for Discussion:

- What are the most critical responsibilities today for official statistics in the developing world? Is their mandate going beyond data production?
- How can this new mandate be financed? What alternative financing mechanisms are available?
- What lessons from other sectors (e.g. health) for the data sector?

Moderator: Kali Taylor, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

Setting the scene: Haishan Fu, Director – Development Data Group, World Bank

Panellists:

- **Neil Jackson**, Chief Statistician, Department for International Development DFID, UK
- **Pieter Everaers**, Director, Eurostat
- **Fekitamoeloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu**, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the UN-OHRLS
- **Silja Baller**, Practice Lead, Digital Economy and Innovation, World Economic Forum
- **Carole Presern**, Head, Office of Board Affairs for The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

16:45 – 17:15 Discussion Q&A

17:15 – 17:30 X. Closing Remarks

- **Martine Durand**, Chief Statistician and Director of Statistics and Data Directorate, OECD