

Misinformation and misuse of statistics: how to respond?

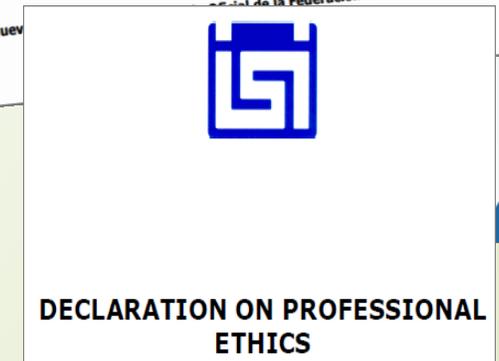
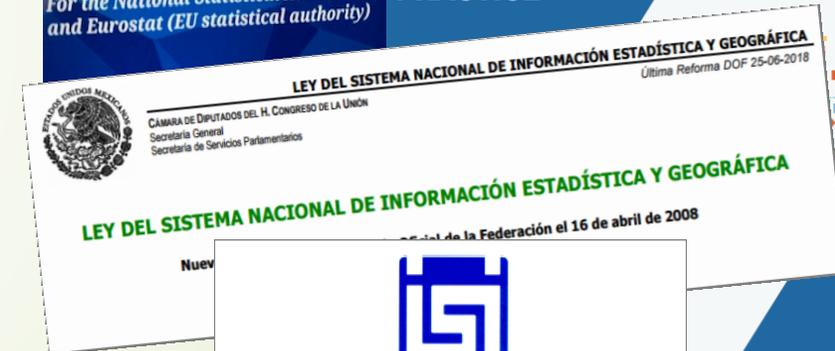
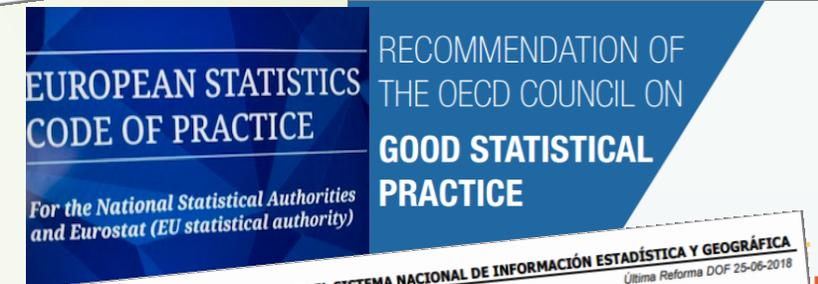


Martine Durand
Former OECD Chief Statistician

IAOS Webinar- Misuse of statistics: Time to Speak Out
6 October 2020

Challenges to existing ethical statistical frameworks

- ▶ **Existing sources of ethics for statistics ...**
 - ▶ National constitutions; Statistical laws; Fundamental principles of official statistics; Codes of practice, conduct, and ethics; International Statistical Institute Declaration on Professional Ethics, etc.
- ▶ **Are challenged by new data environment, digitalisation, artificial intelligence**
 - ▶ Myriad of new players may not adhere to existing principles (w.r.t. quality, independence, transparency, privacy, confidentiality, etc.)
- ▶ **Increasing risk of misinformation and misuse of statistics**
 - ▶ Especially when emotions prevail over facts and evidence
 - ▶ Role of social media



Sources of misinformation and misuse



Data is wrong, inaccurate, or incomplete

e.g. small or biased samples; flawed international comparisons; omissions



Outright manipulation/ falsification

e.g. price and GDP statistics in Argentina; public debt in Greece; telecom prices in Mexico; 'alternative facts'



Domination of new communication channels

e.g. 'social media echo chambers'; opinions formed on beliefs rather than accurate facts



Lack of statistical literacy, errors of interpretation

e.g. misinterpretation of complex statistics: international comparisons of deaths due to COVID

How to respond?

- 1. Reaffirm and safeguard existing ethics principles**
- 2. Better position official statistics as trusted source of information**
- 3. Work towards new ethical codes for a 'datafied society'**



Reaffirm and safeguard existing ethical principles

- ▶ **Official statistics, a precious asset that needs to be safeguarded**
 - ✓ Always remember our core mandates; take ethical considerations seriously
 - ✓ Preserve independence, impartiality, objectivity, confidentiality, privacy
 - ✓ Improve data quality and be transparent on methods to collect, process and analyse the data
- ▶ **'Walk the talk'**
 - ✓ Prosecute breaches of statistical ethics, including to statistical laws
 - ✓ Submit to external reviews



Better position official statistics as trusted source of information (1)



Valorize and improve dissemination of existing statistics



Offer new statistical products and services targeted to different audiences



Further expand social media culture; be present where discussions take place and opinions are formed

Better position official statistics as trusted source of information (2)



Speak out if official statistics are being misused and correct inaccurate facts



Work with fact checkers



Build partnerships and collaborations



Contribute to statistical literacy



Monitor trust itself, and respond to identified “credibility gaps”

Work towards new ethical codes for a 'datafied' society

- ▶ Time to act?: Should we aim for a new International Data Convention/Charter that would:
 - ▶ Establish a **set of universal ethical data principles**, based on existing frameworks, to be developed and **endorsed by public and private actors** from the whole data community
 - Including e.g. methodological excellence, transparency, impartiality; privacy of personal data; data accessibility; data sharing and exchange; data interoperability
 - As well as prevention of abuse and misuse of data
 - ▶ Create an **independent enforcement mechanism** to ensure that all signatories to the Convention are in compliance with the agreed principles
 - Through regular assessments containing recommendations
 - Making the findings public

Official statisticians have a key role to play