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## **Istat communication strategy in times of pandemic crisis**

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### **Abstract:**

The Covid19 disease, outbreaked in Italy before all other European countries, has led Italian institutions to undertake severe measures to contain the contagion and to adopt strategic actions to communicate accurate and proper information in times of crisis.

In this rapid and unexpected change of scenario, Istat recognized communication and dissemination as a strategic function, to communicate all the actions realized during the health emergency: the adoption of sustainable acquisition techniques for the collection of statistical data, the introduction of methodological solutions and innovations in the use of new data sources, mainly the realization of thematic surveys to analyse the effects of the health crisis on economy and society.

Istat communication sector gave a straight support with a pervasive communication campaign called “#IstatperilPaese” (“#IstatfortheCountry”) to make easily available a wealth of useful data to institutions, public decision-makers, households and businesses.

### **Keywords:**

Communication; Crisis; Covid19; Strategy; Social media; Disinformation

### **1. Introduction:**

Due to the coronavirus epidemic and following the measures adopted by the Italian Government to contain it, Istat has implemented a series of actions to ensure the continuity and quality of statistical production even in the emergency situation.

The Institute has reorganized data collection by sustainable acquisition techniques, innovative methodologies and use of data sources in order to be able to provide the Country with the data that in this specific period it asks for. Above all, those on deaths in the first months of the current year (normally released not in such real time). The Institute also provided most appropriate solutions to support statistical production processes, in full protection of workers' health.

Official statistics are fundamental for measuring the evolution of economy and society. Their production and dissemination at the service of institutions, policy-makers, families and businesses, therefore, cannot be stopped, but they need to be rethought to be ready to provide the Country with all necessary answers, and above all to support and monitor the future Country's recovery. Istat has long invested in dematerialisation and can therefore ensure full operation of its databases and accessible online services.

In this context, it was necessary to quickly plan an emergency Communication strategy aimed at giving visibility and explaining all these measures that the Institute has been carrying out to ensure continuity and quality of statistical production even in this situation.

Specifically, Istat planned and realized a coordinated campaign for the various channels and communication tools whose claim is: #IstatperilPaese.

The underlying message #IstatperilPaese (Istat for the Country) means that even in this difficult moment for the Country, the Institute continues its work with respect for its role and mission, making itself available to the community even more than ever, despite the emergency.

Since the beginning of the restrictions, the entire Communication team has been asked to operate through the various institutional channels to give visibility to the efforts made by the Institute, but also to promote a message of responsibility for the contribution that everyone is required to give in order to 'help Istat to help the Country'. Therefore, it was created of a web section<sup>1</sup> (online since March 2021) dedicated to the Covid-19 emergency theme. The contents gradually available here are punctually disseminated also through Istat main accounts on social channels with products specifically designed for the target platforms.

At the same time great attention was paid to the care of users through direct communication channels (mainly virtual relationships with users by email and Customer Relationship Management for data provision).

In this rapid and unexpected change of scenario, Istat has to face two main challenges:

- to ensure the continuity and quality of statistical production to support and monitor the recovery and build the future of the country
- to guarantee clear and non-contradictory information in a context of very strong disintermediation of information, excess and rapidity of sharing of information, difficulties in verifying the truthfulness of sources.

In particular, Istat recognized communication and dissemination as a strategic function, to communicate all the actions realized during the health emergency: the adoption of sustainable acquisition techniques for the collection of statistical data, the introduction of methodological solutions and innovations in the use of new data sources, mainly the realization of thematic surveys to analyse the effects of the health crisis on economy and society.

## **2. Methodology:**

Since the first days of the emergency, therefore, the need to ensure the Institute a communication strategy for the crisis was evident, also through a creative concept and a visual identity recognizable, able to express the commitment assumed by Istat to serve the country.

To define an integrated communication strategy, these main steps was realized:

- Analyzing the context in order to plan an emergency Communication strategy
- Creating a 'control room' where the main actors make quick and effective decisions

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/239854>

- Realizing a coordinated campaign for the various channels and communication tools
- Finding a right and effective claim for the campaign.

The main communication objectives were:

- Inform about the actions taken to ensure continuity and quality of production
- Enhance statistical results, directing users to data and insights on economics, health and demographics
- Consolidate Istat's reputation as a producer of official statistics
- Maintain contact with users and stakeholders and ensure engagement with Istat
- Promote a message of responsibility with respect to the contribution that everyone is required to make to "help Istat help the country".

### 3. Result:

A series of actions were therefore immediately implemented that involved all institutional channels to give visibility to the efforts made, but also to promote a message of responsibility with respect to the contribution that everyone is required to make to "help Istat to help the country ". This result confirms the need to increasingly hypothesize datatelling content and, more in general, of statistical narration aiming to communicate effectively, immediately and intuitively 'what's in Istat's kitchen'. Infographics and visual contents (images, informative videos, animations, clips, tutorials) represent the most appreciated product on the net. Moreover, they bring audiences closer to Istat brand and implement one's reputation, even within a situation of crisis.

#### 3.1. Website [www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it)

The basic strategy is using the site as a collector both of any information that may be of users' interest during the health emergency and all data and studies that Istat can produce ad hoc to provide support to public decision-makers and citizens in general. Therefore, a new area dedicated to Istat during the COVID-19 emergency was created on the website (both in Italian and in English).

The Italian one consists of more pages than the English version because much of the information is mainly referred to the national public. This web section is constantly updated and it hosts all the extraordinary measures and temporary provisions implemented by Istat, together with clarifications regarding the continuation of the surveys and news on data releases about the topic in question. It is designed with a dynamic and versatile structure, so to be continuously enriched with statistical or communication contents as soon as they are available (infographics, interactive graphics). In fact, a page hosts an interactive graphics system that allows to see the deaths trend in those municipalities of which data Istat has already disseminated.

To make each page of the area in which one navigate recognizable as part of the #IstatperilPaese section, a banner was inserted at the top and a navigation column in the right sidebar. In the last one some external useful links to other Italian and foreign institutions on Covid-19 theme were also inserted.

In addition, to make it easier for users to navigate, there is a unique tag, covid-19, inserted on all pages of the section as on all those that contain data or information relating to the health emergency: <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/covid-19>

In the Italian version, the home page of #IstatperilPaese has been structured to make it accessible to different audiences. The principle is to help those who visit the section to orient themselves according to the reason why they are browsing it: if looking for

data (health and demography, economy, territorial statistical information) or whether they are called to participate in a statistical survey.

The analytics platform used is Matomo.

### **3.2.Social media**

The main Istat social accounts (Twitter - double version Italian<sup>2</sup>/English<sup>3</sup>), LinkedIn, Instagram) have been used to amplify the communication of all actions concerning #IstatperilPaese and to relaunch the various contents published on the institutional website and disseminated by the Press Office.

Through social channels, a new strategy of interaction with users was implemented to ensure the protection of Istat brand and reputation by means of transmitting correct and transparent messages.

This interaction rate generated by the proposed contents was measured. The analysis showed that the interaction was very low in the first days of the emergency while it had an important growth since the publication of the weekly data on deaths and that of the infographic realized and published on the relative data sources which aims to simply explain how to read the already released data.

The analytics platform used was Talkwalker and then Hootsuite.

### **3.3.Relationships with users**

With regard to the front office with users, two communication channels are available to respond promptly to anybody, thanks to continuous listening and interaction.

They are the Customer Relationship Management platform 'Contact center'<sup>4</sup> and "Comunica"<sup>5</sup> an email service for citizens who contact us for general information requests via direct messages.

Data requests strictly related to the emergency in progress began to arrive through the Contact center system (mainly updated data on deaths).

At the same time, many users preferred to contact Istat via e-mail, for immediate feedback on issues about a set of topics only partially related to the data recently released on deaths.

A lot of questions for interpretative clarification of mortality data were received, especially given the deluge of numbers that currently invades the network on the subject. In addition, many people - especially via social networks - were spreading fake news on these numbers, confusing users. Even some important newspapers have fallen into the trap and it was necessary to intervene on several fronts to rectify the information so wrongly disseminated.

The perception obtained downstream of the period considered is that users appreciate timeliness in providing them with answers to the questions expressed.

### **3.4.Handling disinformation**

The most critical, complicated and undoubtedly extremely important aspect to be considered in the #IstatperilPaese campaign was linked to disinformation and fake news to be proved as wrong, especially on Social media channels. To oppose the distorted use of data in line with Istat corporate role, Istat realized a specific Covid Social Media Strategy by choosing to insert 'No #Fake' and 'only #verifiedaccounts' in the social tweets or posts certifying the presence of incorrect communication, with, in

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<sup>2</sup> [https://twitter.com/istat\\_it](https://twitter.com/istat_it)

<sup>3</sup> [https://twitter.com/istat\\_en](https://twitter.com/istat_en)

<sup>4</sup> <https://contact.istat.it/>

<sup>5</sup> [comunica@istat.it](mailto:comunica@istat.it)

addition, the comment: 'Aiutaci ad informare correttamente il Paese' ('Help us to correctly inform the Country'). A not conventional strategy that gave positive results by increasing Istat brand awareness and its e-reputation, while raising the level of user involvement at the same time. Many positive feedbacks and appreciation for the done work arrived, following Istat entrance in these social media conversations.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion:**

In time of crisis, Communication has a central role and it is necessary to be ready with a flexible and agile strategy to respond to a new, pressing, often confused demand for information and to systematize, for different communication channels (Website - Social channels - Press office - Front end with users) tone of voice, languages, messages and actions.

#### **Lessons learned:**

- It is necessary a predefined crisis communication plan, to be activated quickly in crisis situations
- Quick and clear communication channels are needed, with data producers, users, stakeholders and other partners
- It is appropriate to maximize the use of the social media in crisis situations: they carry out a central role in effective communication.

#### **Opportunities:**

- Think strategically, be flexible and agile, to easily recognize and act on the opportunities that arise
- Promote the value of official statistics, strengthen the brand and use of new data sources
- Use the crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate the value of the Institute and its relevance to society.

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