



WORLD STATISTICS CONGRESS CLOSING REMARKS - 20TH JULY 2023

Bonjour tout le monde
Good afternoon
pjila'si

First, I want to thank the organizers of the World Statistics Congress and the leadership at Statistics Canada for the honour of speaking with you at the conclusion of your Congress.

When I excitedly told my wife that I had been invited to provide some closing thoughts to 1,500 of the world's foremost statisticians, she immediately looked puzzled, and worried — before gently reminding me that I had failed statistics.

I might not have loved my stats course in university, but I am a huge champion of what you do. In fact, I can't think of anything, both in my former life as an entrepreneur, and in my current role as a senator, where I do not rely on the work of statisticians.

Indeed, strong democracies rest on a foundation of trusted facts, especially in the age we now live.

So, as a champion — not an expert — I want to first explain how my colleagues and I use the facts and insights that you produce. Next, I'll speak about the crucial importance of your work in the era of big tech, before concluding by focusing on some considerations in your efforts to grow the trust and engagement of citizens.

Let me start with a little background.

The Senate of Canada is an appointed parliamentary body, intended to be a counterbalance to the elected and partisan House of Commons. As we review legislation, regulations, and policies, we have a constitutional responsibility to hear the voices and arguments that may not have been considered by the House.

Today, 80% of Canada's senators are independent, 54% are female, 12% are Indigenous and 21% are from other minority groups. This diversity of backgrounds helps to enrich debate on every topic, and that debate is embedded in facts, not dogma. As I mentioned before, I cannot begin to imagine fulfilling my current responsibilities without the insights produced by Statistics Canada, and the comparative data from the global partners in this room.

As a measure of our work, today, more legislation is amended in the Senate, with more of those amendments accepted by the House of Commons, than has ever been the case before. When our amendments are accepted, it is because we have made a compelling case to the House, based on evidence and arguments that had often not been considered previously.

So, I want to thank you — on behalf of all my colleagues. The evidence that each of you help to produce is central to the work we do on behalf of Canadians.

Your work is increasingly important as the challenges in our world grow in scale and complexity.

Think back to when the World Statistics Congress was last in Ottawa. 1963 was the year that John F Kennedy delivered his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech in West Berlin. It was the height of the Cold War and the world was clearly divided between two super powers.

Sixty years later, our world still has worrisome and dangerous global divisions, but the polarization does not end there. Troubling levels of polarization exist within many of our nations, much of it results from the ways we now receive information through big technology platforms.

Increasingly, we only see information that agrees with our narrow perspective because platform algorithms commonly serve up more of the same content in an effort to keep us engaged.

That user engagement has made big tech companies richer and more powerful than most nations.

Political movements and parties now use big tech platforms to micro target their messaging, quite often feeding increasingly narrow slices of the population exactly what they want to read, see and hear. This environment is perfect for spreading disinformation — falsehoods that are knowingly shared directly to those who readily accept and share them within their networks. A counterbalance of facts or a contrary viewpoint are too often entirely absent.

Sixty per cent of Canadians now believe that we're more divided today than in the past. This is concerning because social fabric weakens as divisions deepen. Cohesive countries are politically stable, their citizens respect laws and they have robust institutions.

January 6th in the United States, the Freedom Convoys here in Canada, fake news and alternative facts are all major wake up calls. Regardless of the survey methods or questions, it's troubling to admit that most Canadians now think our political parties are a divisive force and do not trust governments.

So how do we reach those who have lost faith in governments and the political process? How do we establish and maintain a strong social contract with citizens?

Simply — trusted information.

It's the product of your work and the foundation upon which we can repair broken trust, build confidence, and begin to bridge the gaps created by polarization. And trusted information helps us to be increasingly effective as we act on commitments to address crucially important issues like the climate crisis and the need for more inclusive economic growth.

But simply producing trusted information is no longer enough.

Consider the first principle of the United Nation's Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics focuses on the need to honour citizens' entitlement to public information, and promoting the integration of statistics into decision making is at the core of the Statistics Act in Canada.

These are not small tasks in our increasingly polarized world.

Importantly, Statistics Canada's modernization efforts have prioritized the strengthening of privacy, ethical and confidentiality frameworks. This is foundational to earning and maintaining the public's trust, and essential to strengthening a social contract.

The resulting trust helps to ensure that accurate and relevant statistics are appropriately incorporated into decision-making across our levels of government and the private sector.

To this end, efforts to prioritize the user or citizen experience have also been, and continue to be, tremendously important.

In my past life in business, I was always looking for big problems, because big problems can become big opportunities and create promising businesses. In almost every case, the biggest challenge I faced was finding the person who was waking up at 3am worrying about a specific problem and looking for an effective solution.

Once I found the insomniac, I worked to deeply understand the job that they needed done — that is, what job wasn't getting done, causing them to be sleepless. This understanding helps to catalyze the implementation of an effective solution.

There's a whole field of research based on the "Jobs to be Done" theory, developed by the late Professor Clayton Christensen at Harvard Business School. As an example of his work, a fast-food chain discovered that more than half of

their daily milkshake sales occurred before 8am in the morning. “Jobs to be Done” helped to explain why and showed them how to apply that knowledge in ways that increased profitability.

So, what is the “Job to be Done” when your information is used to its full potential? Obviously, the audience and job will be different depending on the information and its use. In each case, you will have to find those who can use that information in order to sleep better.

You’ll need to better understand how to deliver that information in ways that will be trusted and will help them to achieve their intended result. You’ll also have to search for those individuals and groups who aren’t even aware that you have information that can help them.

In business terms, the sale is not complete until the customer achieves their definition of success — until they feel like the job they’re worrying about is done. I would offer that the same is true in your line of work.

There’s no shortage of folks waking up at 3am worrying about various economic, social, and political burdens. So where does your role end — once accurate information is produced, once it has been seen, or once a user or citizen has valued those insights? What is your definition of success?

I’ll end with this final point. In order to reach those whose trust in government has been shaken, all of us need to find and work with the organizations that those disaffected citizens do trust.

These may be very different than traditional partners, and the way we communicate may have to change, but in the case of statistical organizations, I think the mission remains the same — providing accurate, relevant, and trusted facts that help strengthen our social fabric and prosperity.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. I wish you Godspeed in your important efforts to create ways that grow the trust and engagement of citizens and decision-makers through your work.

I truly believe that broadening access to accurate information will help to reduce polarization by contributing to constructive debates in families, among friends, and in communities and workplaces right across each of our countries.

Merci

Thank you

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