Data to see. Stats to hear.

Video and audio for Istat's digital and social communication[1]

Introduction

We cannot do without the senses.

Today, sight and hearing represent two elements to be taken into account in the construction of digital and social content truly immersive and engaging for audiences.

Today we talk about the *Internet of the senses*; the possibility of creating digital sensory experiences on the Web is becoming a reality and will result in a true multi-channel and multi-format approach. It is not just about stimulating users in new and interactive ways, but about creating more accessible experiences that deliver content and information in the formats required by the public.

The eyes and the listening represent the heart of the immersive experiences deriving from the connection of our senses. Then the sense of smell and taste will also be involved.

In reality, we are faced with that "revolution of the senses" of which McLuhan had already written, according to which the history of the senses can be told starting from the technologies or the media that from time to time have characterized the different eras: "all media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of the human being that cause deep and lasting changes to his nature and that transform his environment".

How do social networks respond to this prevailing of senses?

At the beginning they were born as a place of social relations, today they are mainly a source of knowledge and entertainment, immersive and experiential. This change of perspective and paradigm binds quite strongly with the prevalence of formats that respond essentially to two senses: sight and hearing.

In the beginning, each social network had its own unique format. YouTube was born for video sharing, Twitter for short texts, Instagram for photos. Therefore, the corporate object and its format are the constitutive digit of the service. So much so that when Flickr, the first social media for photography enthusiasts to become popular, decided to add the ability to upload videos, users protested and many abandoned it.

In the current time, social networks have become real platforms for creativity; a system that supports participation and communication between and common users. Therefore, today all the social media we know have incorporated all the possible formats giving priority to those audio and video.

A paradigm evolution that can refer to these two starting points:

➤ **An increasingly convergent culture;**
➤ **Authenticity and horizontality of communication.**

First, we are, in my opinion, in an evolution of the so-called *convergent culture*, of which Jenkins wrote in 2007. Indeed, in an almost extension of the products of grassroots culture to what we could define the *Recommandation media*, ie governed by an algorithm.

The very heart of convergent culture is represented by participatory cultures and Top-down convergence. In the early days of web 2.0 and social media the audience created content from the bottom up, then it becomes content itself.

It is the realm of conversation. Key values are represented by individual stories, experiences, implication or involvement. Whether we call them grassroots media, citizen media, self-produced content, participatory media, they are always the result of a two-way vector that implies a continuous exchange between those who produce a message and those who receive and rework it. Subsequently, there was no clash between different media, no end of communication. On the contrary, we were faced with the maximum of convergence that can encourage participation and conversation.

The transition was, therefore, from the computer as an interactive medium to the web as a participatory space to social as an informative place with a return to communities and topics of study.

Now these bottom up products, born from the practices of **mass self-communication** (Castells 2009), are no longer so from below nor asymmetric, to put it with Foucault, but are the result of a narrative sharing. Social media, feeding on all those practices of convergent culture, allow content of different nature to spread in a widespread online and become productive texts, that is, capable of producing interactions and new meanings for users who take them.

The second aspect concerns the **authenticity and horizontality of communication** starting from the idea of the communicative extensions of the human senses of which McLuhan already spoke, whose purpose is an analysis of the outcomes that the media produce as extensions or extensions of the senses in the panorama of the human communicative experience of representation of the self and the world of people in the global networked age.

Later, one can borrow the reflections that have long accompanied studies on reputational communication. Reputation coincides with a trust that is never betrayed by the messages you send, be they articles, videos, podcasts or public events. Reputation means consistency of behavior in everyday life, based on a strategy that unravels on all the touch points of the organization. Reputation is, to be exact, the brand that consolidates, stabilizes, establishes a climate of trust with the public that relate to the company/ entity.

Authenticity as a value began to be more relevant years ago, but it is with the pandemic that it has assumed greater centrality. The need to communicate in an empathetic and engaging way, both within companies and towards the public, was born precisely because of the reaction to this situation of uncertainty of the pandemic. Transparency and an approach that considers individuals not only economically, but also and above all as people are increasingly required. With a lived, needs, ability to choose and well-defined desires. In order to meet this need for trust and concrete relationships, an authentic and careful communication is successful.

An authentic and horizontal communication is achieved precisely by fielding those formats (such as audio and video) that until yesterday were almost exclusively created and created by users involved in contests and similar activities necessary to maintain brand awareness over time.

1. Format of *Socialverso*: digital video and digital audio

Video is the tool that most involves the audience, if we consider only the quantitative point of view. However, there is an audience that prefers to listen to stories only in audio format.

In general, several research shows, for the use of social products, the almost total prevalence of audio and video content.

Let's start with the videos.

Think that, according to the latest data of the report "Digital 2023", in Italy almost all people between 16 and 65 years watch online videos every week (91%), an increase of 3% compared to the previous year. This growth is mainly driven by entertainment content (+2%), and influencer videos (+5%).
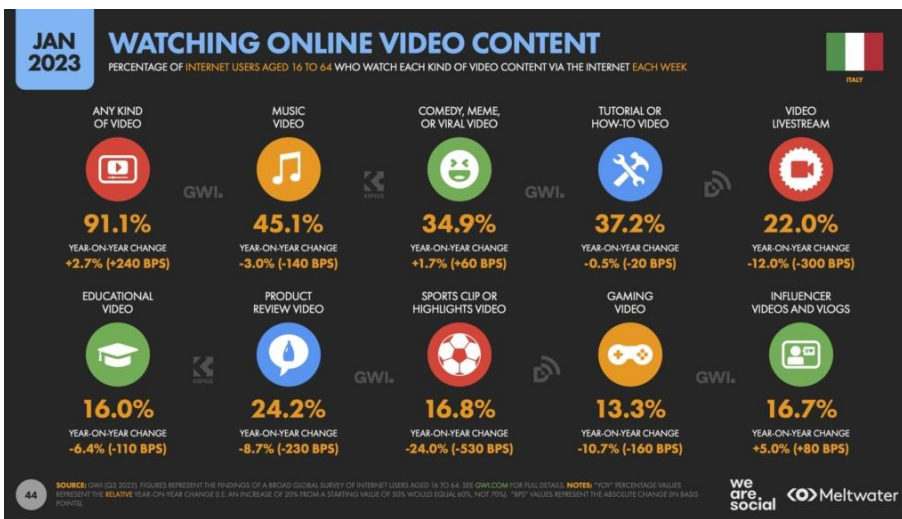

Source: We are Social

The video content - especially those in the short format - appeals to all generations: from baby Boomer (that is, those born from 1946 - 1964) to the alpha generation (those born from 2012 onwards), no one excluded. We increasingly feel the need for a more honest and less "curated" online experience (as it came from below) and the short format seems to give us just what we want.

We move towards the so-called "*snack culture*", with a media consumption that prefers infotainment through the use of "snackable content", short content, no longer and not only generated by users, which leads to the fragmentation of attention, the overload of information and stimuli, and an addiction to social media that have become almost an extension of our hands.

A predilection for short video, snacks, an integral and fundamental part of social media marketing. Consider that, according to a Meta report, Instagram users spend 17.6 million hours a day on the Reels, while on TikTok are 197.8 million daily hours, ten times more.

At the same time, according to some evidence emerged from the Observatory Digital Content, promoted by the School of Management of the Politecnico di Milano, it emerges that today video entertainment is the most popular paid content (42% of internet users). Video Entertainment - the second sector, after Gaming, for incidence on total spending - is the sector that grows with the highest pace: +33% compared to 2021, exceeding 1.3 billion euros.
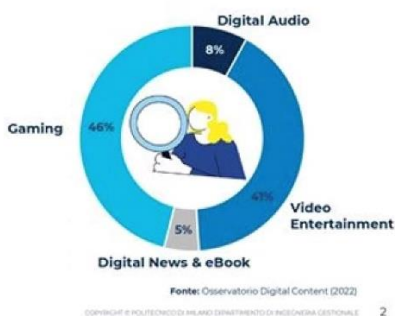
Source: Observatory Digital Content

Not just videos, though.

In America it has been called the *perfect storm of digital consumption.*

It's the obsession with voice narration. So in a world dominated by screens of all kinds, from immersive to miniaturized, audio has carved out a place in the sun between smart speakers, sound logos and podcasts.

And he did it "in silence".

According to a Wiko survey, 66% of Instagram users consider oral communication more inclusive than visual communication. In addition, 35% say they regularly enjoy podcasts with entertainment content (55%). In addition, according to 67% of participants, audio will transform social media, affect the way content is produced and enjoyed, both for Generation Z and for Baby Boomers. On Tik Tok and Instagram, for example, the audio meme is rampant: audio taken from TV broadcasts, movies, viral phrases.

We are in the presence of a cross-generational phenomenon with a strong inclusive power.

Audio and video formats are immersive and one-to-one content. They give the opportunity to really build a much stronger relationship with the audience. Both the video and the audio represent the new hearth around which to listen to stories, live and follow them and warm up to the warm fire of the narration, as Benjamin would say.

The prevalence of audio and video content confirms a further change in the social web: the sharing mode is no longer centered on the search for friends, as it was at the origins of the birth of social networks, but becomes a sharing of topics. A remarkable paradigm shift, which platforms like Facebook, for example, struggle to recognize.

2. Video and Audio for statistical communication

In recent years we have seen many innovations in terms of styles, the registers and languages of public and institutional communication that have led to forms of integration of some communication practices typical of corporate communication within public mixes, as well as the experimentation of expressive codes far from that bombastic and obscure language that for a long time has characterized the communication of the PA. All this has found maximum expression in social platforms, where such practices and forms tend to coexist, crossing and mixing in new and deep ways.

Social media have well understood the strong performance and engaging ability of audio and video formats and have made these formats of creativity grassroats, those content generated and preferred by users, because they are easy to use and enjoy.

Also the datatelling has oriented more and more towards video and audio content useful to narrate the identity of the brand and that represent very engaging and appreciated products by followers.

Therefore, the social media strategy for statistical communication, in a hybrid and convergent media ecosystem, has focused more and more, also based on the reflections in the previous pages, on video content on Instagram, on an increasingly enhanced institutional channel YouTube and an audio experiment on Twitter, with the #IstatSpaces. These are informational contents that approach users and actively involve them, according to the relational, conversational and sharing paradigm (Ducci, 2009; 2017; Lovari 2013; 2016).

They therefore have three characteristics:

- o Information
- o Humanization
- o Relation

Consider, for example, that for about two years all Istat events have been streamed live on the institutional YouTube channel.

Source Youtube Analytics

In the second part of the year 2022, then, the experiment #TheWeekInIstat was launched, the appointment on Friday with the head of the Istat Press Office, Davide Colombo who tells, in Reel format, in less than two minutes the data, the most important announcements and releases released by Istat during the week.

The product is sustainable and usable effectively.

The data of these months show a high involvement with the product in question, with peaks of **6000 views** on LinkedIn. The total of impressions obtained is more than **55,000** while the total of views is about **10,000.**

To date, **41 reels** have been posted on Instagram.

These have been played for **59,163 times**, have reached almost **42 thousand** accounts and have got **1209 likes**. (Source Instagram Insights)

The interesting element is that, through this content, it intercepts public not followers of Istat and, above all, there is a face that, every week, becomes familiar making more and more human data and their communication.

All this responds precisely to a first theme that is increasingly central for social media and, in particular, for statistical communication: **edutainment** or even **informativity.**

Over the last few years, Istat has carried out several experiments of edutainment (with high engagement) through gamification content (such as basket games, true-fake, etc.) and others of more popular type. As well as focusing a lot on making short videos with high informative content. For example, Instagram in recent years (especially since the lockdown period) has proven to be an increasingly informative channel with audiences looking for information, news and insights.

Instagram is a place where public opinion is formed and consolidated today.
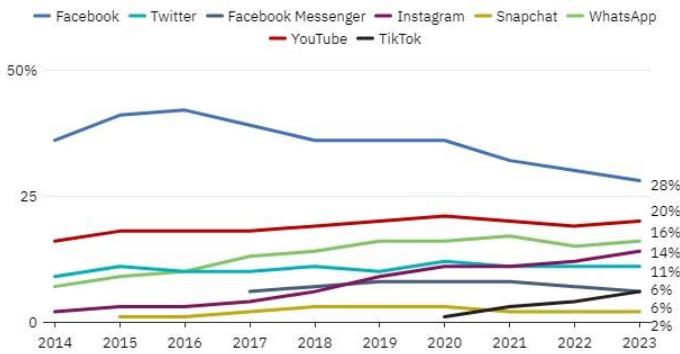
As evidenced by the Digital News Report 2023 in our country only 16% is informed by going directly to information sites; 24% comes to the news from social networks, increasingly central, especially for the youngest. In the use of news holds the TV (69%), while 70% say to use it online, with 34% who claims to share news on social networks, chat and email.

In addition, "very low" is the confidence in the news (34%) and the percentage of Italians who pay for online news: the share stands at 12% and is the same as five years ago[2].

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[2] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023

Facebook — Twitter — Facebook Messenger — Instagram — Snapchat — WhatsApp
— YouTube — TikTok

50%

25

28%
20%
16%
14%
11%
6%
6%
2%

0

2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Q12B. Which, if any, of the following have you used for news in the last week? *Base: Total sample in each country-year in UK, USA, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and Ireland ≈ 2000. Note: No data from Australia or Ireland in 2014.*

Source: Reuters Institute

As far as social networks are concerned, Facebook is becoming less and less relevant as a source of information and consequently as a driver of traffic on sites. TikTok gains ground among young people, video content is increasingly important for news. Only 28% of respondents said they had access to the news via Mark Zuckerberg's social media, in 2016 it was 42%. TikTok is the social network that records the fastest growth: it is used in general by 44% of young people aged between 18 and 24 years, it uses it for news 20%. Chinese chat is most used in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Podcasts continue to attract consensus, although "overall it remains a minority activity": of 34% of users who access a podcast monthly, only 12% listen to a program related to news and current events. According to the research are the podcasts in depth, as The Daily from the New York Times, those most listened to on various markets.

Top social media and messaging

Italy

Rank	Brand	For news	For all
1	Facebook	44% (-1)	68%
2	WhatsApp	27% (+1)	83%
3	Instagram	20% (+2)	53%
4	YouTube	19% (-2)	58%
5	Telegram	9% (-)	29%
6	TikTok	8% (+3)	23%

Figures in parentheses indicate change from previous year.

Get the data • Embed

REUTERS INSTITUTE   UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Source: Reuters Institute

Another informative product designed for Twitter were the IstatSpaces. Audio-based spaces that have enabled the activation of live conversations on some economic topics of interest (inflation, GDP and redistribution of income) but also contents of promotion and dissemination of statistical culture, such as the Statistics Olympics and publishing products such as "Noi Italia 2023", which, in the 13 events held so far, have obtained almost 2000 tuned.

Twitter audio spaces totaled 15,900 views and more than 600 interactions.

Over the months, we have tried to make it a fixed appointment (at least once a week), transversal and synergistic between Press Office and Communication Department, identifying content and guests on an ad hoc Istat theme that we intend to promote in that week. Think of actions to promote statistical culture, events, publications and publications, research reports, etc....

The goal is to use the audio format to increase knowledge and awareness of what the Institute does and what researchers do.

It is clear that such a work involves an important editorial work of identifying the product to talk about and preparing the content to tell. It was also identified a fixed day (Wednesday at 12) in which the public can enjoy the audio format and be loyal. Each episode is recorded and remains available to followers in the period following the live broadcast.


Istat has also made the first five episodes of the podcast of "Data to the Hand", as will be seen in the next pages. Even in audio format, complex topics are dealt with in a simple and light tone, without sacrificing scientific correctness.

Here I report only some analytics that allow us to understand the phenomenon. From the beginning of the campaign, then from the spread of the first podcast downloads were 2,287.
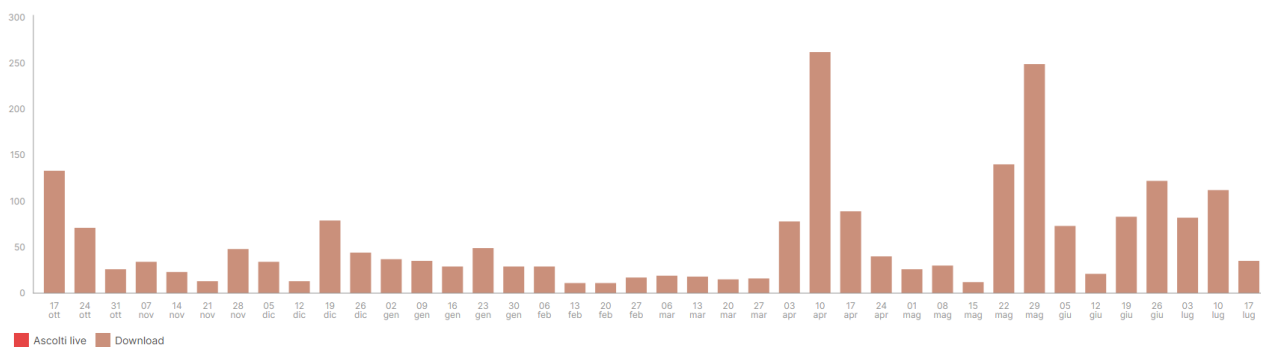
Source: Spreaker Analytics
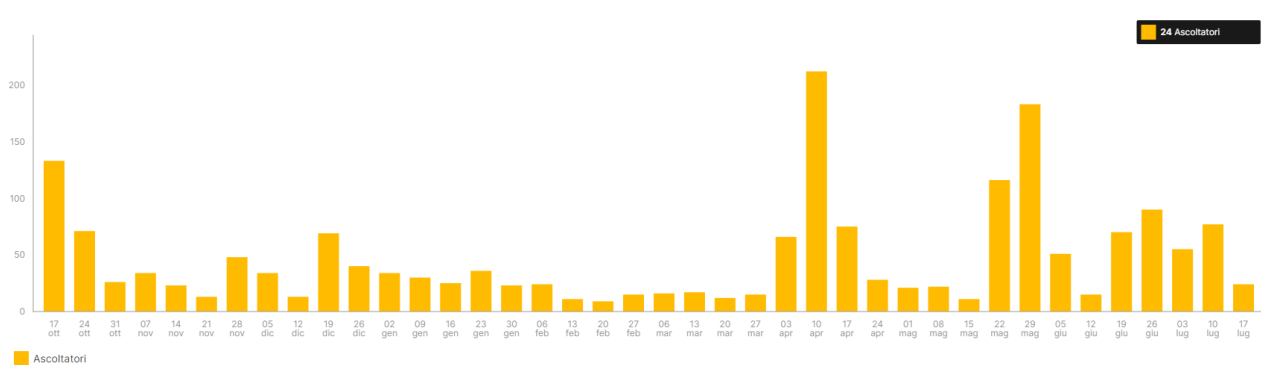
Source: Spreaker Analytics

Below are the sources that allowed listening to Istat podcasts.

✔	Spreaker	68,08 %	1.557
✔	Spotify	22,39 %	512
✔	Google Podcasts	3,67 %	84

Source: Spreaker Analytics

Now let's go into detail on how every single episode of the podcast is made and find out how we tell how statisticians "give the numbers".

3. Reasons

First of all: why did Istat decide to approach the podcast path? Because listening to audiobooks and podcasts, as we have seen, is growing in Italy and has accelerated in the pandemic period. Having reliable numbers on listeners is still complicated, research in this field is carried out by private bodies and sometimes commissioned by stakeholders, for example NielsenQ research for Audible - the Amazon's audio content division - noted that in 2020 almost 14 million Italians had listened to one podcast at least during the year (figure up 15%

compared to 2019); the increase in users, aided by the first lockdown ordered to counter the pandemic in Italy, was maintained in the following year, even registering further growth. The data from Ipsos - another private company carrying out surveys for institutions and companies - based on a sample of about two thousand people aged between 16 and 60 years old, provided numbers a little different but confirmed the upward trend. The success of the audio sector is also testified by the increase in the number of users of audiobooks, more than doubled between 2018 and 2022, as Istat noted thanks to the survey "Aspects of daily life". Istat is also expanding the survey questionnaire by including specific questions about podcast usage. So in the 2024 edition of "Aspects of daily life" the new expanded questionnaire will be used and by 2025 we will have official data on podcast listeners, based on a sample of about 24 thousand households.

4. Listeners and Producers

But let's move on to the production side: an Italian podcaster, Alessandro Piccioni, using the search engine Listen Notes, estimated in 2021 the existence of about 25 thousand Italian-language podcasts, 10 thousand of which born during 2020. The pandemic year, therefore, represented in Italy the exploit of podcast listeners, but also that of audio content providers. Two examples for all: were born in 2020 podcasts of the Italian Constitutional Court, in which each episode told a ruling that changed the socio-cultural life of our Country; also in 2020 was born Assipod, the Italian podcasting association with the aim of promoting the culture of podcasts in the Country and refining the skills of podcasters.

According to Spotify, in 2021 the Italian podcast catalog grew by 89 percent, a higher average than the rest of the world.

The numbers, regardless of their accuracy, signaled an important opportunity to be seized by official statistics. Podcast listeners, according to the profiling outlined by the different sources, were not only looking for entertainment, but seemed attracted by the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and do so with the guidance of a voice that, podcast after podcast, would become familiar, accompanying them in the discovery of something interesting. The challenge for Istat was to create a "narrative" that could expose the data in a simple way, suitable for a non-expert audience, but according to an engaging format and without failing to scientific accuracy. And to bet on the possibility of finding an audience, especially among the younger generations. We wanted to create a room where to think and get involved, we had in mind a "slower" activity than the games experienced on social networks to intrigue young people, we had in mind a more loyal-enhancing, a more engaging experience for our target; we wanted, in other words, to build a relationship that had a greater depth. The ideal context for the podcast project was *Dati alla mano*, the disclosure section of the institutional website, the platform from which "to launch" the experiment.

5. The prototypes

So, at the end of 2021 we started with two prototypical episodes, one dedicated to the Non Observed Economy (Noe) and a second based on the theme of Absolute and Relative Poverty and on data on income compared between Italy and other EU Countries. The topics chosen were placed on two different sides, one of easier appeal, Poverty, and the other more technical, more challenging, which needed an attractive title and a more challenging unfolding of the narrative to keep the attention of non-specialists. The prototypes were made in house, with two laptops and two condenser microphones, recorded in a somewhat secluded room of Istat and at times when colleagues were not present. A "homemade" production we would say, although the tools - microphones for recording, software for post-production- were professional, as were the skills of the colleagues involved. The free room of Spreaker, one of the best-known platforms for listening to podcasts, was used for the publication, with a link from the dedicated page of *Dati alla mano*.

The formula, for both prototypes, was based on the presentation of the topic and data by a narration voice who professed not to be an expert and, to facilitate identification by the listener, she "discovered" hand by hand the available data asking questions to the expert. The whole thing might seem an informal interview but was actually based on a script defined and shared between interviewer and interviewee. Before the recording, rehearsal of reading the script aloud were done to simulate a free conversation. The creation of a script ensured on the one hand the scientific correctness of what was stated and on the other hand the elimination of the so-called sound-trash, i.e., the hesitations and repetitions typical of spoken language.

The first effectiveness test took place within Istat. The first podcast - the one on the Non Observed Economy, titled "Measuring the invisible" - was not advertised on the home page of Istat web, but only announced on *Dati alla mano* and reported among the many initiatives of the eleventh Italian day of statistics (20 October 2021). Nevertheless, it has been "discovered" by both internal Istat users and external users. It was noticed by academics who wrote to the email address of *Dati alla mano* to ask for the dates of new podcast releases.

6. The leap in quality

After the second podcast we decided to shift to a more professional aplomb, acquiring a contract with a specialized company from Milano and purchasing a paid room on Spreaker; this took some time, but now the company - Storielibere.fm - assures us the availability of a recording room in Rome and remote post-production and sound design, in addition to the dissemination also through its platform. The topic we worked on after the prototypes were:

1) Demography (from the baby boom of the 60s to the current baby bust, how individuals, households and the way of conceiving marriage and parenting have changed)

2) Gender stereotypes (women's advantage over male peers in education does not translate into an employment advantage, on the contrary, our Country has the negative record in Europe, compared to the employment of women. Among other reasons the cultural legacy that binds women to a traditional type of role still matters a lot, and some statistical clues help us understand this)

3) The aspects of water (we are first, in Europe, in water withdrawal for drinking. Where do we get it from? How do we distribute it over the territory? What are the problems and, more importantly, what are we doing to counter climate change that threatens water availability?)

4) Made in Italy (which of our typical products are most appreciated abroad? How have our business relations changed and what is the role of multinationals today?)

From the relationship with the agency we learned some rules of production: the need for an opening acronym, a brief presentation of the topic and a sendoff summarizing the highlights. But the basic criteria we have worked on since the prototypes are the same:

a) Choice of topic

b) Study of topic

c) Building the "story"

d) Great attention to language

e) Enhancement of the researchers responsible for the data

Let's analyze them one at a time.

Choice of topic. It should be tied, as far as possible, to what is being talked about. For example, the podcast on absolute and relative poverty was born in conjunction with the debate, in Italy, about the so called "citizenship income", and the need to ensure support for the poorest part of the population, made even more fragile by the difficulties of the pandemic period. The podcast on demography, on the other hand, accompanied the many interviews of demographers - including the previous president of Istat - on the worrying decline in birth rate in Italy. The water podcast followed the census of the waters for civil use and, unfortunately, the heavy floods in Emilia Romagna. The podcast on Made in Italy was inspired by the attention of the moment with respect to the promotion of indigenous production, so much so that the name of the Ministry of Economic Development was changed to Ministry of Businesses and Made in Italy.

Study of topic. Once the theme has been chosen, the commitment is to search for data, to read the analysis carried out and, finally, a meeting is organized with the researchers responsible for the identified content to clarify doubts or deepen specific aspects. Often meetings are more than one because a vast topic - and a vast topic is certainly more appealing - involves aspects that pertain to different strands of production, not only one specific survey.

Building the "story". First rule: not limit yourself to a single type of data but find connections. For example, the gender stereotyping podcast builds a story of the "cultural" disadvantage of women starting with data on education - disaggregated by gender and type of studies done - that see women in pole position for the brilliance of achievements and then moving on to data on employment and hourly wages in which the route is reversed in favor of men, even with equal education. Going ahead, the data on time use show the female component of the population facing a total workload -that is the sum of paid job and unpaid family work- which is significantly higher than that of their male peers. And it's a load that increases as early as the time the woman becomes part of a couple and then explodes with the birth of children, assuming the woman does not give up her job. Finally, through the data collected with respect to men's and women's opinions, it is evident that the

male breadwinner/ female caregiver model still survives, especially in the South of Italy, and instead tends to be overcome, at least partially, among the younger and more educated segments of the population. The whole story is based on the evidence of the data, but through the data you can build a path, you can build a "story".

Great attention to language. The realization of the script is a continuous *labor limae*. A continuous adjustment made by checking fluency through reading aloud. Simulation of spoken language is complex but crucial. Before the script is submitted to the researchers, for verification of scientific correctness, it must "mature", it is necessary to eliminate the self-referential aspects, put yourself in the shoes of the inexperienced listener, explain everything that is beyond common sense - acronyms, even if known, must be loosened and the technical terms illustrated - use the questions "facade" (ie ask a question that assumes an answer that, instead, the interviewee flips completely) to emphasize the most unexpected aspects of the topic.

Enhancement of the researchers responsible for the data. Not everyone feels comfortable to come into the recording room and talk to the microphone. At the end of each episode, however, the names of the researchers who collaborated in providing data – as well as the guest in the room being interviewed - are mentioned anyway. Presence in the recording room, however, allows the researchers to be known by the public; it means that their work get value and, together with their personal efforts, the commitment and the role of Istat get value too.

7. Critical issues

The realization of the script takes a lot of time. We need to build an interesting story using only the data of the Institute and achieve a credible dialogue: this is not easy. Moreover, not all researchers are "good actors" while naturalness, however simulated, is an important element for the effectiveness of the podcast. Before recording, then, several reading rehearsal should be done, every sentence should to be studied, in order to underline the keywords on which to drop the emphasis.

The realization of the podcast, finally, also depends on the researchers' working time, on their willingness to deepen the themes, to verify the script, to record the dialogue. This kind of commitment is not always a priority for them, sometimes the time of realization is stretched and it may not be easy to keep the right focus.

8. Outlook

At the time we write the podcasts already published have totaled 2.287 downloads overall. In particular: Measuring the invisible (666); The rich and the poor (546); Who is afraid of demography (437); Gender stereotypes (401); The forms of water (168); Made in Italy (xx).

The commitment is to make them known through social promotion activities, through digital PR and Istat ambassadors. Once the 12 episodes under the contract with the company Storielibere.fm are over, we will pull the strings and decide whether to continue to make podcasts on issues of general interest, whether to focus on

a specific target by selecting ad hoc topics, whether to diversify the offer also addressing more technical aspects, perhaps also diversifying the editorial staff and the narrating voices.