



2014 TRIENNIAL SURVEILLANCE REVIEW—EXTERNAL COMMENTARY—COMMUNICATIONS

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Prepared By **Martin Wolf¹**

1. The purpose of surveillance by an outside agency, such as the International Monetary Fund, is to deepen understanding and influence choices. The needed understanding is of global, regional and individual countries' macroeconomic conditions and prospects. The recommended choices are of both policies and institutional arrangements. In doing its job, the IMF is, whether it likes it or not, a political actor.
2. The IMF must ensure that its messages reach those relevant to discussing, agreeing and implementing these decisions. In the good (or bad) old days, the needed strategy was simple: IMF analysis covered standard instruments of macroeconomic policy—the exchange rate, monetary policy and the fiscal stance; its principal audiences were governments (more precisely ministries of finance) and central banks; and the analysis was presented in turgid documents that mostly never saw the light of day. This was a world of insiders talking to insiders.
3. The IMF still talks to insiders. But hoi polloi are listening. Indeed, they often believe they have a right not just to listen, but to be heard. The extent to which this is true varies across both countries and topics. But the opening of markets, the rise of democracy, the revolution in communications technology and the consequent birth of social media have transformed the political and social context in which the IMF operates. This transformation seems certain to go still further in the years ahead.
4. In sum, the IMF has to address more audiences in more ways than ever before. It is not enough to address those with whom it feels comfortable.
5. The Fund has, in fact, made a great deal of progress in its communications. It is able to attract substantial media attention to its flagship publications. It is making increasing use of new forms of communication, notably blogging. Speeches by senior officials are widely noted. It engages with a far wider variety of interests and public and private institutions than it used to.
6. All this is both important and welcome. Yet, despite this progress, it has been hard—hitherto at least—to identify a systematic and clearly thought-out communications strategy that shapes the entire work of the organization. It is often

¹ Chief Economics Commentator, *Financial Times*. This paper represents the views of the author and does not necessarily represent IMF views or IMF policy. The views expressed herein should be attributed to the author and not to the IMF, its Executive Board, or its management.

difficult to pick out the Fund’s core recommendations at global, regional or national levels. The Fund does not always explain its objectives as clearly and effectively as it might do. The outsider drowns in an ocean of the Fund’s partially overlapping outputs.

7. In brief, the Fund has improved. But it could still do better. So how is it to proceed? It must make communications a starting point for its work, not something bolted on at the end. In deciding the programme of work, the communications strategy must be joined to the substance from the first moment. Above all, if the IMF is to communicate effectively, it needs a strategy for deciding and then shaping what to communicate, to whom, and how.

8. First, “what?” In its global, regional and country work, the IMF needs to decide its core messages, remembering that audiences, particularly broader audiences, cannot be expected to absorb more than a few: more, as often, is less. These core messages must be agreed at the highest level and then mercilessly disseminated, until changed.

9. Second, “whom?” The IMF is ultimately responsible to its *members*. It cannot—and must not—try to bypass member governments or central banks. But if the Fund is to be effective its *audience* must go far beyond policymakers in core areas. This wider audience includes policymakers who work in other areas. It also includes people and institutions outside government: market participants, non-financial businesses, social and political institutions and media, which are now of many different kinds. The IMF must be prepared to engage still more deeply with unfamiliar audiences in unfamiliar ways, in order to make clear what it thinks and why. Media organizations remain the principal vehicle through which the wider public is addressed, but they are no longer the only ones.

10. Finally, “how?” The IMF needs to produce documents regularly (probably twice a year, at the time of the Annual and Spring Meetings) that state its main messages briefly (in a few pages) and simply (in direct language). This should be done not just on global and regional challenges, but also for national audiences on pressing national challenges. These documents would bring together (with suitable links) relevant recommendations of the IMF’s work. They would be deliberately selective. This is not just to be done at the global level. Country and, where appropriate, regional teams (for the Eurozone, for example) should be doing the same for their countries and so play a bigger role in these policy dialogues.

11. The more the IMF continues to produce its current plethora of reports and analyses, the more important will be such brief overarching statements of the IMF’s recommendations. The IMF should also use a wide range of media to get its messages out. *Not least, it should be prepared to repeat itself, often.*

12. None of this, however, obviates the need to have something to communicate. Keynes recommended “ruthless truth-telling.” In its surveillance work, the IMF must dare to be unpopular and even wrong. An IMF that is never wrong will never say anything useful. This will demand institutional courage. While communication is essential, substance is even more so. A successful marriage of the two is vital.