EESC CIVIL SOCIETY MEDIA SEMINAR 2017

The role of civil society in a world of globalised communications

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Calle de las Huertas 73 | 28014 Madrid | Spain

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Dear readers,

The 11th Civil Society Media Seminar on “The role of EU civil society in a world of globalised communications”, organised for press officers and communication experts from civil society organisations, brought together knowledgeable EESC Members, media experts, academia and journalists from the EU Member States delivering interesting input and looking at the topic from different angles.

Since we believe that the speeches of our panellists and guests and the active debate they provoked are interesting for a broader audience, we have drawn up this report summarising their contributions.

Democracies are based on freedom of speech and opinion. Unfortunately, this freedom is now all too often used to spread “alternative facts”, fake news or – as our panellists rightly call them – mere lies. Lies, spread even by top level authorities, seem to have gained social currency. A development that we must be alert to!
Hate speech and bullying are other phenomena that have been boosted by internet platforms. We all know that young people in particular can be receptive to boorish, bold language. While in "normal life" this tendency is usually counterbalanced by parents, teachers, supervisors, trainers, etc. reprimanding the youngsters, in the internet this corrective element is missing. The more people this kind of language use, the more not only the young, but all of us become used to it and the limits are pushed back. In my view, this is a catastrophic development which in the long-run will undermine all mutual respect.

Therefore, we need a remedy for hate speech, disrespectful and unethical language, and news needs to be true or at least checked for truthfulness. The virtual room must not be allowed to degenerate into a place where people can give free rein to hatred and lies.

We also have to ask ourselves if we, who are representing organised civil society, have done enough to counter this development of rising populism, growing inequality and increasing loss of trust in political and other elites. Have we presented our good work enough so that citizens can see what we have achieved and upheld for both European workers and employers and other interest groups?

I do hope that this report will make a small contribution to raising awareness and keep this important debate alive. We must all be careful not to fall into the many traps of the internet, be it fake news or misleading information, etc. devised to divide our societies and destroy the values the European Union is built on.

I would like to thank our partner, the Spanish Economic and Social Council in Madrid, for its hospitality, the city of Madrid for a wonderful reception in one of Spanish capital's most beautiful houses and an interesting historical tour on the trails of the Habsburgs.

Special thanks go to our speakers, our panellists, and our EESC members, who moderated this seminar. Last but not least, I thank our audience for the lively debate.

I warmly recommend that you go through this report, and wish you informative and thought-provoking reading.

Yours sincerely,

Goncalo Lobo Xavier
EESC Vice-President for Communication
Opening session I

In Spain as in Europe our main objective needs to be to emphasise what brings us together rather than what separates us

Bernardo Aguilera Sánchez-Garrido from the Spanish Economic and Social Council (ESC), which hosted the 11th Civil Society Media Seminar, welcomed the participants on behalf of ESC President Marcos Peña. In his speech he recalled the Spanish ESC’s fundamental role as an advisory body to the government, a channel to convey public opinion to policy-makers. Media played a key role, not least by telling people what organised civil society was doing for them. But the mass media had changed significantly and so had its influence – at least in paper formats - since today nearly everybody could be a kind of journalist on the net. This was also a major issue for the European Union, causing considerable challenges and pressures. In particular, the rise of populism and influencers actively working against the European system posed a serious danger.

Mr Sánchez-Garrido was convinced that, in spite of its weaknesses, the Spanish model of a strong civil society working together in the ESC and advising the government was a good one, not least since it guaranteed dialogue and
consultation between people and the government. "In Spain as in Europe our main objective needs to be to emphasise what brings us together rather than what separates us," he concluded.

**Including citizens is the best antidote against populism**

**Jorge García Castaño**, city councillor, represented the City of Madrid, which offered a guided tour on the Habsburgers in the Spanish capital. In his speech he stressed the importance of informing citizens and including them in government decisions. Mentioning Madrid's fight against pollution, he argued that it could only succeed with citizen involvement and support.

Though urban civil society was complex and plural, a dialogue needed to be initiated, which involved listening to citizens' concerns and finding a compromise with them. This approach was the best antidote to populism. Madrid he called the city of civil mobilisation, the capital of the 15th May movement, which "was a real experience of democracy". This mobilisation inspired many others and had led to new ways of governing, especially at the local level. It had also helped curb the new populist trends in Spanish societies. Referring to social networks, García Castaño said that their influence extended far beyond an election campaign in the United States or anything coming from Russia, but had an impact on what was happening in our society and also in our mainstream media. A general transformation was under way, with the posting of scandalous or fake headlines and information on social media purely to see if they received hits. And often they did, and had a negative influence on people's opinions and behaviour.

García Castaño believed that there was no better antidote to all these dangers than information, civil mobilisation and active citizenship. With this in mind, Madrid city council was trying to establish transparency, participation, open governance policies, open plenary sessions and citizen consultation. "Madrid for instance is a city which has a very powerful feminist movement and also a powerful LGTBI movement and I think this is one of the main guiding lines for municipal policy. Secondly we don't want to leave anybody behind, especially not the people who have been most affected by the crisis. And thirdly we want a city which is increasingly sustainable from an environmental point of view."

**Truth will always prevail**

**Marcial Marín**, Secretary of State for Education who replaced Minister Íñigo Méndez de Vigo y Montojo, was convinced that only strong civil society participation could strengthen the roots and foundations of EU values. Also, the role of the media was essential for the EU. "The more confusing the times we face, the more important the work of
good journalists is’, he said and referred to Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa, who had recently said that he had never seen so clearly in modern times the importance of independent and free journalism.

Information should be based on the honest search for truth, said Mr Marín quoting a British journalist. The development of new technologies in the field of communication had created a number of opportunities to do this. The opportunities were clear: immediacy, plural information, wider access to information, greater participation of civil society and the opening up of new communication channels, so that truth and the values that we shared could reach such a large audience that the editors of the main newspapers could never have imagined before the era of the internet. All of these should lead to greater freedom, greater knowledge, greater participation and better information and should therefore strengthen our democracy.

But there were also risks. One of the enemies of this new information flow was anonymity. This anonymity allowed the expansion of untruths, even insults and intimidation without the person responsible for spreading it being accountable for what he/she had said.

The traditional media were defenceless against this uncontrolled manipulation and spreading of fake news. Therefore, this communication revolution which had certainly led to freedom had also generated a crisis of credibility which affected not only the media sector but also the formation of public opinion and essentially the transparency and normality of democracy, especially the rule of law.

The fallacies or lies of people acting anonymously were particularly of concern when they were adopted as a strategy by groups aiming to destabilise society unscrupulously. Europe would have to react to this threat, which was the new face of attempts to manipulate public opinion. Manipulation, propaganda – these were the characteristics of totalitarian regimes of the last century and their effects were very damaging to society. Therefore it was very important to link education also to the values of the European Union, which included democracy, participation, gender equality, social rights, etc.

Also, journalism and education needed to work together very closely in order to have an influence on society, and this influence should be a healthy one with a triple function: informing, training and also entertaining.

Finally, Mr Marin referred to the phenomenon of interference by external manipulators who tried to disturb the foundations of democratic systems by using social media. Spain, for instance, had been seeing a new form of dirty warfare, including hackers manipulating information and consequently having a serious impact, particularly in Cataluña. However, it would be unwise to say these operations were attacks that were exclusively against Spain, the ultimate objective of such interference wherever it came from was rather to destabilise the European Union as a whole. It was not the first time that Europe and also the United States were facing strategies of digital intoxication with an obvious intention of interfering in politics.

The European Union which had clearly strengthened us as a community and allowed us to maintain our Constitution needed to investigate and act against this new type of dirty warfare and should not allow outside forces to destroy the constitutional order that we enjoyed in the EU. The EU needed to prevent “them” from putting our rights and freedoms at risk. It was time that the European Union responded to these threats as it had done in the past with other challenges. Saint Theresa of Ávila, once said that the “truth suffers but it never dies”.

Therefore, Mr Marin believed that those who were using lies as a weapon for confrontation while remaining anonymous were losing the battle even before they had engaged in it because truth would always prevail and with it our freedom, our peaceful coexistence and our democracy.
Gabriele Bischoff chaired this panel stating in her introductory remarks that populism was on the rise, and not only since the EU opened its borders to refugees. She pointed out that the word "populism" often was used as a general term and that it actually needed some clarification as the concept was quite opaque. People tended to project a lot of things into this word: left wing populism, right wing populism, anti-EU populism. Some also used it as a label in order to marginalise people.

For this reason, Ms. Bischoff welcomed the multidisciplinary approach reflected in the panel's composition, with academics and journalists covering political science (democracy and populism), sociology (society, elites and populism) and the media, and their role when they described the phenomenon of populism.

Mrs Bischoff said that although there were many links to current political developments in the US, populism should not be reduced to the "T-word". The view on this issue, as Ms. Bischoff pointed out, had to be broadened. The panel would discuss the issue in two steps, first the origin, rise and development of populism in our democracies and second the impact on civil society and what the latter could do about it.

On this issue, Ms. Bischoff, mentioned experiences with existing populist or autocratic governments and warned that the "critical" sections of civil society, e.g. NGOs in the field of migration or gender policy, were particularly under pressure. She then opened the debate by inviting participants to give their views to explain why populists were currently so successful in dominating the political agenda.
There is an increasing distrust towards politics, the establishment, the government and political parties

Claudia Chwalisz said that populism is nothing new, but has been an established part of Western European democracies since at least the 1990s. Support for populist parties has been growing and has found a new peak of interest amongst journalists and commentators with Brexit and the election of Donald Trump.

So what does populism mean?

It is a form of rhetoric which claims that legitimate authority flows from the people, us, rather than from the established elites, them. In itself, it is not an ideology like liberalism, or socialism. It does not have specific policies associated with it, but it is a moral claim of democratic legitimacy, in order to give more power to the people.

There are three main aspects that drive populism, which are economic, cultural and political. Ms Chwalisz said that she would not talk about the economic aspects because it is very well established that they are the weakest drivers causing people to vote for populist parties. She focused rather on cultural factors, mentioning that there are some elements of moral psychology which also are quite important.

Since the 1980s, most countries had seen a transition towards capitalism; democracies had also become more prosperous. A survey called the World Value Survey has tracked how these changes in society have impacted values. Though every country has a unique trajectory, nonetheless a certain number of trends are quite general amongst all of them.

- Firstly, with more industrialisation, countries have moved away from traditional values such as religion, ritual and deference to authorities, towards more secular values;
- Secondly, most countries have become wealthier and values such as economic and physical security have changed into what are called emancipative values that emphasise individual rights and protection as a matter of principle;
- Thirdly, this cosmopolitan or globalised perspective has gradually become the dominant narrative in Western societies.

But it does not mean that everyone in these countries has gone along with this change. These changes tend to be concentrated geographically in cities, urban areas, and university towns while the anti-globalised are mostly elsewhere else. So the populist backlash is in a lot of ways linked to the anti-globalists defending their traditional values.

Issues such as immigration have brought the gap between these two groups to the forefront. An additional element should be added to consideration in this debate, which is authoritarian values. A lot of work had been done which has clearly shown that authoritarianism is not a constant personality trait – it is not like you were either authoritarian or not - but a dynamic. It is a psychological predisposition that some people are more likely to become more intolerant only when they felt threatened.

So if one started to understand things in this way, it becomes a bit clearer how the demographic, economic, geographic and cultural factors interact when an issue like immigration, for instance, becomes salient; especially in
recent years with the refugee crisis where there was primarily Muslim immigration which became a hot topic. Because for anti-globalists, there is not only the security threat associated with the risk of terrorism, but also a normative threat tied to Islam. Many see this religion as especially difficult to integrate into secular Western societies. The World Values Survey shows a general trend towards openness and tolerance overall: but it is these very conditions that have activated the authoritarian tendencies of those who happen to be predisposed to them when they felt threatened.

Lastly, Ms Chwalisz talked about the political factor driving populism because, while politicians had never been particularly popular, there is nonetheless a general trend towards greater distrust in politics, the establishment, the government, and political parties. A recent Chatham House report – based on a survey in ten European countries and published just a few months ago – shows that only 8% of the public felt that politicians listened to people like them.

Also, her work in the UK shows that there is an increasing trend towards people feeling that their voices do not count in the decisions taken by those elected to represent them. The people who feel more strongly in this way are those who had voted for UKIP (UK Independence Party) and the SNP (Scottish National Party), which were both described as populist parties.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have also published a new paper demonstrating that support for authoritarian positions is strongest amongst the old and the less educated. Mistrust in political institutions and support for the anti-establishment populist sentiment, on the other hand, is strongest amongst the young and less educated people, which might be one of the reasons why an increasing number of young people have been voting for parties like the Front National. The growing political discontent is one of the main reasons why populists’ call to give people a voice has become appealing to many.

In her research published in two books, The Populist Signal (2015) and The People’s Verdict (2017), Ms Chwalisz looks at democratic innovations that could help counter and fight this underlying trend. For sure, trying to control populism just with economic proposals alone would not work. It is necessary to find a way to tackle the cultural factors that are dividing society and also to find new democratic innovations to counter the underlying trend of distrust in the long term.

The role of the media is to reveal the deceits that are behind the populist programmes off right-wing populist parties by using easy-to-understand explanations.

In his introductory statement, Mr Albert Garrido recalled his first encounter with Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1974, when Mr Le Pen spoke in front of around 170 people. Now, more than 40 years later, 34% of the French electorate - actually one third of French voters - had voted for his daughter’s party. How had this become possible in such a short space of time, and in a social and political context which was more or less characterised by prosperity and in a process of the political institutionalisation of the European Union Examples of the success of the far right were to be found in France and in the Netherlands, where their support had quadrupled; in Austria, the Freedom Party had become a “popular party”; and in Germany the Alternative for Germany was on the rise. The upsurge of populism in these countries must concern all of us in European democracies, said Mr Garrido, because these parties’ programmes combined skepticism,
islamophobia, xenophobia and other trends which have characterized ultra-conservative parties for at least 40 years. It was a model that questioned open societies - societies where individuals can act freely.

The rise of the far right was also related to the huge social cost that European middle classes had to bear to overcome the crisis in 2007-2008, the economic downturn; the European Union had been facing - with rising inequality - increased difficulties to share with EU citizens the idea of the common project, said Mr Garrido. This was actually a pressing problem because the European Union should be able to convey its message to those who were active members of this institution, namely its citizens.

And, of course, the impact of Brexit needed to be considered, and the European identity crisis which was a result of that. These factors were all responsible for the rise in populism in European countries, especially the migratory crisis - the refugee crisis. Many people believed that refugees brought salaries down and changed the rules of the game - the rules of the social contract that used to characterize the European social model.

At the same time, Mr Garrido believed that the increase of ultra-conservative populism reinforced governments such as the Polish and Hungarian ones, both "rebel governments" since their actions went against the political and cultural model the European Union had been built on. Today's situation was quite different from the situation in Austria in the year 2000, when the Christian democrats had formed a coalition with the Freedom Party which forced the EU to place the country under institutional surveillance.

Mr Garrido said that the programme to overcome the crisis supported by the European Union could be summarized in 4 words: austerity at all costs. This programme actually worsened the economic downturn and at the same time resulted in an increasing number of working class people voting for the far right, for instance in the outskirts of Paris. In 1981, when Mr Mitterrand was elected, votes from the periphery of Paris were crucial to make him president. However, this time the periphery of Paris mostly voted for Marie Le Pen. It was interesting to look at this phenomenon: in 1974 Jean-Marie Le Pen was just a character, a clown, but 40 years later his party was quite relevant. While Mr Le Pen obtained 18% of the vote in 2000 against Jacques Chirac, his daughter had got 34% against Mr Macron. So we could see a 16% increase, more than 1 point per year, which, in Mr Garrido's opinion, was a very alarming situation.

Many countries were facing a huge nationalist challenge that undermined Europe and the articulation of culturally plural societies where Islam also had a permanent place. And there was also the fact that its presence in public spaces was not common 30-40 years ago, not even in France, where traditionally the Muslim community had played a quite important role.

What did right-wing populism offer? Mr Garrido explained that it basically offered proposals that included special, attractive ideas with protectionist tendencies. These programmes were presented in such a way that they were easy to understand and communicate, unlike those offered by the authorities of the European Union. And in this situation, they attracted people's attention, frequently older audiences, who were often afraid of the future, and with an approach that was essentially conservative, but they - right-wing populists - did not explain how they would turn their proposals into reality.

The media needed to play a role in countering this: in general, Mr Garrido thought that they must reveal the deceptions that were behind the populist programmes offered by right-wing parties, using easy-to-understand explanations. These were often very binary approaches adopted by populist parties, for example when they talked about building a wall to hold back migration in the countries of Eastern Europe, or when they wanted proper organization of migration in groups, etc.
Something else which should be underlined with regard to the success of populism coming from the far right was that conservative nationalist populism found in Donald Trump a leader on a global scale that they did not have previously. He quasi institutionalised fake news, alternative facts or alternative realities, etc. which basically was just lies on a global level. Fake news is just lies!

Trump and these leaders from the European far right considered themselves to be adversaries of the establishment. Something that was not true, because Mr Trump, who was a multimillionaire, and as such was part of the establishment. If he had not been part of the establishment, after several bankruptcies, he would perhaps now be begging in the streets of Manhattan. Trump perfectly knew the mechanisms of the establishment because he lived within it, rather than outside it. But it was a typical fallacy to say that he was against the establishment. It was very easy to say that, because the person who said that could be seen as the great corrector of all the evils of the system. The system referred to globalisation, economic policies, social systems, etc., which were known.

The role as corrector of the weaknesses of the system was also useful for gaining power because it sent a very effective message. So effective, that in countries like Austria it looked like the far right might end up in government because it had already got excellent results in the recent elections.

So what is the role of the media? The role of the media was to point out deceit even if this was done retrospectively. Social networks and social media did not serve this purpose because communication specialists said that there was too much noise. Only the traditional media could really reveal this deceit. They could base this information on solid sources, credible sources that could provide public opinion by checking what was going on.

Someone had already said in the morning, recalled Mr Garrido, that now any citizen could be a journalist. "I don't agree with this", he said. He rather thought that any citizen could now be an informer about something, which was different from being a journalist. Social networks were a means of communication that carried information which could be called into question. Journalists used social networks, but they used them through identifiable media and at least such information was quite real.

In reference to the secretary of state, who had closed with a very interesting sentence – "the truth perishes but it doesn't disappear", as Teresa de Ávila, said, Mr Garrido concluded that for the first time since the Second World War, there was certainly a risk that truth might disappear.

**Elites are behind the rise of populism because they don't offer any alternatives**

*Michael Hartmann* began by mentioning an interview which had been published in a German newspaper, entitled "The main people behind the rise of populism are the elites". In his view, this title was very appropriate and he tried to explain this by saying that the elites had played an important role in the rise of populism for a number of reasons:

- Firstly the elites in all areas, not only in economics and politics but also in administration and justice, for example the European Court of Justice and also the media for two or three decades, they had been
responsible for the main economic differences. Two examples from Germany: In Germany, the real available income of the bottom 10% of the population between 2000 and 2015 had dropped by 17%, while at the same time the available income of the top percentage of the population had grown by 14%. The gap grew by a third in the last 14 years. Now the bottom 40 percent of the population had an income that was no higher than it had been 20 years ago. This was not only the situation in Germany, but also in Great Britain, the United States, France, Netherlands, etc. There were some differences in the figures but the trend was the same everywhere.

- Secondly, political elites played a very important role by describing this trend as a trend which had no alternative. Angela Merkel on many occasions speaks of the market shaped democracy. Therefore democratic decisions were no longer dependent on the needs of the population rather than on markets. According to the political elites, in political decisions one could not choose between a numbers of different alternatives as they were now subject to globalisation.

Last year, Mr Hartmann, wrote a comprehensive book refuting this thesis of no alternative, since there existed many possibilities, many for example in fiscal policy alone. The Panama papers, paradise papers were proof of this, but politicians of the last 20 years had been saying that there was no alternative, that we had to accept this reality, and unfortunately the media supported this opinion.

In Germany there was a specific situation, as there was a concentration of media in Berlin, even most of the policy desks of the regional media was also already based in Berlin, and they all worked in the same sort of square km in the city. They were concentrated in the same area and they got together with the politicians, the economic representatives, etc. They lived in a sort of bubble, all within the mainstream that said that the situation could not be changed.

Furthermore, credibility also suffered when the population repeatedly had seen members of the elites trying to evade taxes by using things like the paradise papers, and thus tried to raise their incomes constantly. There were two famous cases last year in Germany - Christine Hohmann-Dennhart who left the board of Volkswagen - before she had also been Minister of Justice in Hessen and a member of the Federal Constitutional Court -, she voluntarily left her position at Volkswagen and had been given more than 12 million euros as a golden handshake. The second case was Air Berlin which went bankrupt; while its chairman Thomas Winkelmann was set receive at least a further 4.5 million euros, many people lost their job. This all happened in a scenario where one already could see huge differences between the incomes of the different levels of society.

We were regularly faced with scandals related to tax evasion. For example, one of the best known editors of an important magazine in Germany avoided paying one million euros in tax. And so the impression was left with the people that these elites were just worried about their own affairs, and that was why the populism of the far right had this very simple argument, they said that the elites were the people at the top and they could do what they liked. In Mr Hartmann’s opinion, the only way of changing the situation was to put pressure on public representatives to turn around this trend.
Populism is firstly a simplification of complex political problems, but political problems are never simple or easy to solve: they require deep analysis and joint efforts

Fernando Vallespín said that firstly, it was very important when talking about populism to make a distinction between right-wing and left-wing populism. And generally when talking about populism we were not referring to a type of political faction and we were not talking about an ideology. We were talking about a type of political communication; we were talking about disclosure rhetoric, a way of presenting social problems. This definition was particularly relevant because it connected/linked directly with the changes taking place in the European public space, especially through social networks which allowed for a type of expression that was not so easy to achieve previously through the traditional media.

Secondly, populism was offering a way out, the perfect way out one could say, from established politics by finding a common enemy. In order to define this common enemy, it used populist media to explain itself. We were now also seeing anti-populism or, in other words, a kind of demonization of the populist movements. But this way was no longer possible, because democratic systems did not work anymore. That was precisely what populist movements had brought about. And this was really important to understand, because otherwise one could not understand the situation at all. It was also because these powerful elites of all types, especially the political elites, had found a perfect excuse - not only for not being accountable but also for finding a political adversary. This was particularly interesting to know after what had been happening with populism from the point of view of democratic systems.

In democratic systems one saw a problem of political representation as the consequence of the appearance of two phenomena which went together: on the one hand, globalisation and, on the other, the increase in social complexity. So political life had become increasingly a life full of technocratic components in which expert knowledge, not ideologies or the opening up of new alternatives but technical knowledge, determined what should be done, which decisions should be taken. This had a lot to do with globalisation but it also had a lot to do with the increase in complexity. These were two points that Mr Vallespin believed had not yet been emphasised effectively at the event.

Mr Vallespin thought that populism was firstly a simplification of complex political problems that needed to be understood as a reaction against the presentation of politics as almost exclusively technical choices, as a means of resolving problems and he stressed the word technical. Therefore it seemed that there was only one necessary solution and that meant that we lost the possibility of introducing other alternatives.

But on the other hand, populism also covered a dimension of politics that the technicalisation of politics had left aside and this was emotions, feelings. Politics was cold; politics was seen as finding solutions to problems where the technocrats made the decisions rather than the politicians. This left out an essential factor of politics which was identity, because one of the things that was breaking down, that was fragmenting our societies, was the feeling of community. Many forms of populism had this in common.

For somebody living in Spain, the fact that people in Austria voted for candidates from the far right - in a country with unemployment rates of around 5%, with one of the highest levels of income per capita - was totally incomprehensive from the point of view of Spain. If we want to find an exclusively socio-economic solution to the problems of populism we also need to include elements relating to the fracture of identities, especially in rural areas where people tend to
feel alienated, in terms of the population living in certain communities, and to try to clarify things a little bit better. Depending on the effect of globalisation in one country or another then we might have right-wing populism or left-wing populism.

Right-wing populism was obviously xenophobic and the perception of globalisation led us to focus on immigration. Globalisation had allowed large hordes of poor people from completely different cultures into countries where globalisation and especially the economic crisis of 2008 had led to major social fractures and what people perceived was that polarisation was not between us and them the foreigners, the Muslims, but basically polarisation at the lower level.

Left-wing populism tended to attract people more because it focused on the injustice that people perceived, because they hoped for a better adjustment of income which was not happening at all.

Another point Mr Vallespin thought was essential, something really difficult to define, was the fear/an unease/ or in German Unbehagen in culture in the West which probably arose out of the perception of the future as a threat/fear rather than an opportunity. In other parts of the world the future was not perceived this way because it was something that people hoped for, something they were working towards optimistically, but in Europe the future was seen as a place where all sort of horrors might appear: "We don't know if we'll be able to maintain our welfare, our pensions that will allow us to have a decent standard of living, we don't know if our children are going to have jobs,…"

So the future was full of fears that meant that many people were looking for a solution to problems by trying to close the frontiers, close the borders, because right now in politics the right wing and nationalism were taking precedence over other populists. So all these factors needed to be considered and what really needed to be analysed was the way in which it was possible to find a response in the discourse on this systemic disclosure.

In established politics, which in itself was fully aware of the fact that its messages were not reaching people, were not being properly disseminated to people, they still had the duty of continuing to make promises that they never met. So little by little this was what we had learned from populism, that it had incorporated an element which was tremendously dangerous, namely the simplification of problems and the search for some reference points or landmarks to achieve the appropriate number of votes.

Furthermore, Macron had been described by a French writer as a centre populist. This could actually be the case. But he did not appeal to the national identity but to the European identity, where the French had always played a leading role.

The danger of populism, in Mr Vallespin's opinion, was not only the number of votes they had got, as in his view they would not have been able to rule any country in Europe. The danger of populism was that their messages and their strategies, especially their communication strategies, were now being used by mainstream politicians, which was actually very dangerous. Because if there was something that had always been very clear, it was the fact that political problems were never simple or easy to solve, but all of them required deep analysis and joint efforts.

Finally, he said, one of the greatest problems that had been identified in our respective political communities was that we were no longer sovereign. The increase in interdependency, the management of these increasing interdependencies was where the problem precisely lied. In his opinion the responsible stakeholders should do their best to let people know that there was no turning back, that the problems of the future could only be solved with new forms of government that of course had a lot to do with Europe and global governance.
Jordi Garcia Viña said that he saw the influence of the social partners diminishing, their positions undermined, compared to the past. The reason for this also lay in society, which not always was aware of the social partners’ work. He doubted if society really believed that their mission was essential. Perhaps some believed that social partners could disappear without any backlash. Therefore it was essential to make people aware of what social partners were doing and how important their work for the people was. But it was also necessary to reflect on their own role, reconsider the role of social partners, their standing, their position as institutions, in order to prevent other forces from succeeding which want to occupy the space held by social partners.

It was particularly difficult for employers’ groups which Mr Garcia Viña was representing. Companies and businesses were supposed to carry out many different activities, but they were not easily contacted in their capacity as social partners.

As an institution they had an additional problem, because they were actually just representing companies. The question was if they were also supposed to provide them with some services, to supply some services to companies?

When it came to conveying the value of an institution they encountered many different obstacles. Mr Garcia Viña believed that his institution too should make use of new tools, of new methods and new techniques to get its messages across, however, not only to companies that they were supposed to represent but also to societies. It was important that societies valued the existence of social partners.
Cristina Antoñanzas Peñalva said that communication was now a global issue and no longer a domestic one. The economic downturn that had affected Europe so badly showed very clearly that the world was globalised. However, the measures that had been taken by the European institutions in order to overcome the financial and economic crisis had actually worsened the situation. And those measures had resulted in one thing in particular: they had greatly undermined the reputation of Europe.

The resulting backlash meant that many people and even countries now were against Europe, unlike a few years ago when most of Europe’s citizens still supported the European idea. These policies in the end also had led to Brexit, and British workers would pay a high price for this decision and would be poorer as a result.

Therefore it was essential to change the direction of Europe, the European Pillar for Social Rights was already a right step in the right direction, provided it was not only a piece of paper, but all governments, and the European Parliament too, needed to implement it and make it effective. A more equal distribution of wealth would be to the benefit of all European citizens.

Her trade union backed the idea of European integration and was against these new liberal ideas that had the potential to demolish and destroy welfare states and the European Union. With regard to media, Ms Antoñanzas Peñalva complained that some of the media had been smearing trade union organisations. The media had tried to undermine trade unions and to smear their reputation because they were the last bastion defending workers’ rights. They had seen messages being manipulated, words being misinterpreted and attempts to impose new ideas and ideologies on people. This manipulation was still going on in this post-truth context.

“A lie is usually a lie”, she said, but the premise was that they repeated this lie one thousand times so that it finally became true, it turned into the truth. Thanks to social media and internet, fake news could quickly be spread a thousand times, and thus it was perfectly feasible today to turn a lie into the truth. Therefore it was necessary to be able to make use of new technologies and the news that was available in order to put up a counter-offensive so that all workers in Europe understood that it was perfectly possible to create a different Europe.

A Europe, that took care of social aspects and social needs. In Spain they knew that very well after having had two labour reforms that had undermined workers’ rights. Therefore her trade union was now organising different campaigns in order to fight fake news by the media, and to recover the rights that had been taken away from the people.

Now her trade union campaigned for higher salaries, secure pensions, better working conditions, and no salaries below 1000 Euros. They continued to explain their position and their values and above all they defended the rights of Spanish and European workers.
People are expected to sacrifice, while they see a lot of corruption amongst the elites

Empar Pablo Martínez said that social networks and the internet had obviously changed our lives: they had changed the way we communicated, the way we related to each other, how we spent our leisure time, etc. In fact, many habits had been changed by the internet and social networks. Also political parties had changed their communication strategies and schools were even adapting their tools to web language.

Everybody had actually been affected by these changes and were adapting to this new reality. With regard to the socio-economic and political crisis that had increased the level of anger among the population, it had also led to a scenario that was ideal for the governing elites: a new period of lower costs because of the reduction of the role of the state and supported also by the European institutions which were promoting the German model of neoliberalism and conservative policies.

One had seen changes, labour reforms to the disadvantage of workers, because austerity policies had led to the reduction of public expenditure. For this purpose, it was essential to reduce the quality of the social state and the social protection networks, and to neutralise the resistance to these policies by fighting trade unions. This attack against trade union organisations had been executed with the help of the media.

What Europe now was facing was a conflict between the proponents of neoliberalism and trade unions and those who defended the social state and democracy. Austerity had brought increased inequality, unemployment, lack of prospects for many young people, immigration and, especially in the case of Spain, the fear of losing jobs and evictions.

People were expected to sacrifice, while they saw a lot of corruption amongst the elites. People saw that politicians did not listen to them, did not provide solutions and this had led to a widespread anger in recent years, which had been channelled through social movements and trade union movements, but it had not been well reflected in the media. There was this trend of cultivating anti-politics and trying to discredit the work that trade unions did.

However, Ms Pablo Martínez said that trade unions also needed to reflect on their work, particularly as regards communication. She believed that social media offered many possibilities, especially considering the dispersion of companies in Spain, and it was necessary to get them involved in the daily reality which was complex and also changing. It had to be done from a European point of view, while strengthening social partnerships with the rest of the world and social media could help in doing so.
Panel II: Fake news – the new anti-media weapon?

Violeta Jelić opened the panel and described “fake news” as a form of yellow press or propaganda, which consisted in intentional disinformation, i.e. deceit through traditional and electronic media and social networks. Fake news is written and published with the intention of misleading readers and supporting certain opinions or election campaigns and causing damage.

Ms Jelić emphasized that there had never been an age of perfect truth. The difference between then and today was that we lived in a time when people were more educated than ever, and standards and expectations rose in parallel with education. Information and sources were easily verifiable. The tragedy of modern society laid in the fact that those spreading lies and partial information did not feel shame or suffered consequences, even when they had been caught lying. Much of fake news published on portals was being created by teenagers in order to earn money by targeting readers’ specific interests through clickbaits.

The question today was whether civil society could do something to stop this trend. How to oppose fake news? In any case, there was a need for civil action and additional accountability for the people behind fake news.
With a poor state of economy and migration waves, people become susceptible for misinformation. They start to distrust official statements from the government or the scientific community and rather turn to conspiracy theories.

Stamos Archontis from Ellinikahoaxes, a fact-checking news site of a small independent team of researchers and journalists dealing with scientific claims, fake news in politics and potentially dangerous internet scams, told the audience that the two articles Ellinikahoaxes published each day were pieces of meticulous research and hard work. The website mainly tried to expose fake news and to help the public to assess information critically and sceptically. He considered Greek people to be susceptible to misinformation because of the poor state of the economy, the unstable political climate and the level of frustration the economic crisis had created in the country.

People started to distrust official statements from the government or the scientific community and basically started to turn to conspiracy theories. This phenomenon was affecting both public and civil officials. He thought that this would not only be a Greek phenomenon as the economic crisis and migration wave had given rise to plenty of far-right political groups such as the Freedom Party in Austria, the Alternative for Germany in Germany and the Golden Dawn, neo-Nazi party, in Greece. The move towards the extremes of the political spectrum was also fuelled by hoaxes and misinformation spread through social media.

There was for instance an abundance of hoax-related incidences which were a danger to public health. The difficult conditions in some countries provided a space for charlatans looking to exploit vulnerable people. A famous example of this was the alternative cancer cure. There was a related case in Greece and Stamos’s team was able to expose a fake doctor operating in Greece who tried – even successfully – to convince people to stop their regular treatment while promoting alternative ways to cure cancer. This individual pretended to be a doctor, but after extensive research into his degrees the organisation was able to prove them to be fake. The organisation handed all the relevant evidence to the authorities. This unfortunately was not an isolated incident.

Stamos Archontis said, "We need to look into the causes of our current predicament and I believe all of us can agree that news outlets play a key role in this. Even though the institutions in charge of informing the public have to keep very high information standards, what we observe is a steady decline of quality journalism which often results in a decrease of public trust in the news outlets."

Online platforms like Facebook and Twitter played a major role in this matter. The vast majority of people around the world got the news through social media. Currently, the only thing people could do if they spotted a potentially dangerous fake article was to report it and to get a friendly automatic suggestion to block the person or the site that posted it. Needless to say, this was not a solution.

By now it was readily apparent that information technology had far outpaced our capacity to regulate efficiently, with all its potentially dangerous aspects. Dialogue was not enough to solve this issue, but we needed further action. If we really wanted to move towards actual solutions to the problem of potentially dangerous fake news being spread via social media, Mr Archontis said, timely solutions were needed: active participation form large social media sites, putting together ideas from experienced journalists and the help of regulatory agencies in order to develop effective tools which could help to combat the issue of fake news. In his opinion small steps, like those taken by Ellinikahoaxes
and other small independent news sites in the world, could have an impact on dealing with the current challenge but their impact would not be big enough to counter this huge problem.

If the problems of misinformation and ineffective journalism were not addressed it could lead to a democratic crisis. In 1983 Pavlos Bakoyannis, a liberal politician from Greece, stated that, "citizens consume an enormous amount of distorted news from the media, so much that they have become unable to properly evaluate the reality in which they are living. As a result, they are effectively unable to make informed decisions", and in Stamos Archontis’s opinion these words summed up the current problem.

**Education – a crucial tool to deal with fake news**

Izabella Cooper, in her presentation, entitled *Weapons of mass distraction - social media, populism and fake news*, covered four areas:

1. Definition of fake news and its types
2. How fake news affected media coverage of migration
3. Methods to detect and monitor fake news
4. Finally she looked at what public institutions could do to deal with fake news.

She divided fake news into three categories: news that was entirely fake, news that was true but declared to be fake, and thirdly news that was partially true but intentionally spun.

Cooper did not consider fake news as a new phenomenon, as ‘yellow journalism’ had existed for decades. She believed the reason it affected us so much now was because social media gave them a ‘nuclear’ destructive bust.

She highlighted four main issues regarding fake news:

- The first being *distribution and credibility*: social media which were involved in spreading fake news now compete with traditional media when it came to story coverage. According to Buzzfeed’s analysis of last year’s US presidential election, the 20 top fake news stories about the election had received more interest on Facebook than the top 20 stories about the election from 19 major ‘traditional’ media outlets.
- The second problem was connected to the fact that fake news used a news-like format. Graphic edition programmes for print and video were now cheap and readily available for all, so virtually anyone could make any text look like a newspaper article or a video like an authentic TV-news piece. It could therefore be quite difficult, from a purely visual perspective, to verify at a glance whether a YouTube video was ‘real’ or not.
- The third problem was the rise of *political lying*. Some politicians themselves generated fake news during election campaigns and traditional media reported their statements failing to verify their veracity.
- The fourth crucial issue were *Social bubbles*. The observation that humans were biased information seekers was not a new one, as there were numerous analyses of the electoral voting behaviour of the US population...
in the 50s and 60s which noted that voters tended to choose those media outlets that would confirm their own views: conservative people would read conservative media, liberal people liberal media etc.

Izabella Cooper also pointed to the fact that while traditional journalism (at least the professional one) obliged journalists to present two sides of the story they cover, this rule did not seem to apply to social media, which allowed us to live comfortably in our social and political bubbles.

In the third part of her presentation she gave a few examples of how fake news affected the coverage of migration in 2015 – the year of the biggest migratory flows since the second WW. The arrival of over 1 million people mainly through Greece and Italy changed the political and social discourse in Europe affecting discussions about integration, multiculturalism, but also security, the economy and the European identity. Many Europeans questioned the raison d’être of the European Union as a whole and of the Schengen agreement in particular: the events of 2015 resulted in many countries temporarily reinstating border controls and eight European countries building fences between them and their neighbours. Far-right and anti-EU parties got stronger, which affected the tone of political campaigns across Europe.

These events created fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news. Ms Cooper mentioned the example of Anas Modamani - the Syrian refugee who took a selfie with Angela Merkel in Berlin in 2015. The photo was then published in 2016 on a variety of social media platforms after the attacks in Belgium and subsequently in Berlin, with content alleging that Modamani perpetrated both attacks. Modamani’s case was widely used by the opponents as an argument against Chancellor Merkel specifically and against German asylum policy as such.

Modamani eventually sued Facebook but lost the case – the court ruling stated that Facebook did not have the responsibility to verify the content of the posts published on this platform. Facebook eventually blocked access to some of the content for users in Germany (IP), though it was still possible to find the posts via direct links or Google graphic search.

When discussing possible solutions to countering fake news, Ms Cooper mentioned fact-checking as one of them. There was a variety of automated tools to do that, for instance a source-centred approach which included methods based on automatic source checking allowing to verify whether news was human- or computer-generated. Another example were tools based on e.g. lists of unreliable web pages and tools which traced the source of information (these could be used with tools enabling text analysis which proved that the author was a non-human actor). Other methods included fact checking and crowsource techniques. Rules to follow while obtaining information were increasingly promoted, helping users to distinguish facts from fakes. She also mentioned the linguistic approach whereby machine learning and AI technologies could be used to make machines understand text and learn to separate real and fake news; this could help trace key-words, hashtags etc. These were, however, harder to trace due to the context in which they were posted. Among the shortcomings of this approach Cooper mentioned the fact that technology was mostly developed for English-speaking countries and that it might repeat human mistakes.

She stressed that while these tools could be helpful to detect fakes from facts, they were only useful for proactive individuals who sought such verification.

In her presentation Mrs Cooper passionately emphasised that education was crucial to deal with fake news. She stressed the importance for the youngest generation to receive training on how to detect fake news from their first school years. Users should be trained to use a diversity of media sources and to use search engines not only search. It was important for all to learn to be open to news and views that challenged our beliefs and opinions. We should do our utmost to get out of our bubbles and not un-friend or block sources or people with different views, and to remain vigilant and skeptical about information and always check information we might suspect to be wrong or fabricated.
She also noted that many media outlets had fact-checking departments already up and running to ensure high quality of reporting. In response to the phenomenon of fake news, fact-checking companies were proliferating and offering their services to media and businesses alike.

In this new challenging reality, public institutions had to be more proactive in providing information, establishing direct contacts with fact checking institutions, not only with journalists. It was important to monitor the coverage of the topics related to business area of the institutions by using tools such as botcheck.me and correct false information. There was a need for public institutions to be ever more transparent and intensify their efforts to detect fake news by feeding information to correct misunderstandings. This inevitably would require more resources, but was necessary.

*Social bots try to influence society; they try to shape the preferences of voters - everywhere where radical opinions are spread, social bots are active*

Tabea Wilke, the German Founder and CEO of botswatch GmbH, considered it important to analyse first of all the circumstances in which we were living. On the one hand, she observed the rise of digital media, where everybody could start a campaign or an information operation. Mobile digital communication was one part of these circumstances. There were new channels to connect people with each other and new tools that had been developed on a daily basis.

On the other hand, she spotted the disruption of facts because there were people who believed everything, and children or young people who did not believe anything at all. It was important to see how people perceived information or messages.

The new developments, the rise of digital media and the disruption of facts, had given rise to situations in which society was very vulnerable. This was a challenge for all institutions. Ms Wilke was working in particular on social bots, which were accounts in social networks that were run by machines, by software, but not by humans. With the help of this software they were able to run more than one account; they were able to run 100 or 100 000 accounts at the same time. The software could be programmed to retweet specific accounts. In that way, social bots could amplify discussions on Twitter, Facebook or any other digital platform. Therefore it was important to look at social bots as they had already had a huge impact in many situations.

One and a half years ago, Ms Wilke wanted to make journalism in Germany aware of this phenomenon. "We had this phenomenon in Germany already in 2014, during the European election campaigns. As you may know, this year we had federal election campaigns in Germany and that's the reason why we wanted to make journalists aware of social bots. We started a voluntary initiative to make journalists aware of it. Many people liked what we did and we founded a company in April this year, which is developing quite well", she explained.

Her company had developed a tool that could automatically detect social bots in real time. It could identify them, track what they were doing and see how they were connected.

The work of her company was focussing on three issues:
Based on stored data, her company was able to verify if sources were reliable or not.

She gave some examples of how social bots had influenced specific events over the past year. The Twitter account "Il duce", for example, was created as a social bot. The creator wanted to troll the US President Donald Trump in his election campaign. Donald Trump was known for retweeting people who quoted him and this bot architect had created this twitter account that only tweeted quotes from dictators, like Mussolini. One day he had managed to get Trump to retweet a tweet from the account, which actually was a quote by Mussolini.

She also mentioned the so-called "Pizza gate" of Hillary Clinton, which was also run by social bots. In general, during the American election campaign there was a very high level of social bots activity. This activity did not only come from the radical right but also from the radical left. The same development had been observed in Germany as well. Everywhere where radical opinions were spread, social bots were active.

In the German election year 2017, there was very low activity at the beginning of September, 2 or 3 weeks before the election date. The last week before the elections was commonly known as the week where people changed their opinion about whom they wanted to vote for. This was a very vulnerable and important period of time. Analysing this period in 2016 before election day in America, the social bot activity on twitter was 18%. 18% of the tweets referring to the elections had been posted by social bots. In Germany the rate was even higher. Social bots activity amounted to 23% during the last week before the 2017 elections.

Social bots tried to influence society; they tried to shape the preferences of voters, not only in the US but also in Europe and other countries. Some of them concentrated on the refugee crisis and minorities in society. Revolution was a very important thing for social bots, some focused on women and many of them were keen to see a divided society.

To sum up, Tabea Wilke stated that social bots influenced public opinion. They shaped the preferences of voters and they tried to undermine faith in the political system. She said it was very important to pay attention to social bot activities.

Fake news makes it to the headlines or at least to the mainstream discourse mostly when a politician or media outlet takes it seriously - this is the point when it becomes dangerous

At the outset of his statement, Giovanni Zagni proposed his own definition of fake news that would also support his remarks. Fake news was misinformation with the intention to deceive, and with the intention to lie. This underscored a behaviour which
firstly, was not illegal and secondly could be explained by many reasons, not all of which were malevolent, and thirdly, it was difficult to point it out because it had to do with an inner process.

As regards the impact of fake news, he had more doubts than answers. There were plenty of studies and articles written by experts with many examples. Only recently Buzzfeed published an article on a massive network of Italian news websites and Facebook pages that spread nationalistic rhetoric and anti-migrants content and disinformation. It covered 170 websites which published huge amounts of false or heavily distorted information for Italian-speaking users. The entire website was set up by a single entrepreneur who reportedly worked with a small staff of 6 people. The article was one in a series of others published by Buzzfeed which had given an insight into the world of fake news in the Italian language. One much quoted article from last year delved into political connections and Russian ties, for example. But what emerged from the big picture was that the majority of these websites by producers of fake news were motivated by money, sometimes underlining political ideology but not affiliated to a specific party. One of the main points stressed in these articles was the fact that those outlets were able to obtain a huge number of interactions, comments, likes and shares on social networks.

Those numbers were often compared, as we had seen before, to the numbers obtained by mainstream media. And yet, that fake news went unnoticed by and large, at least in Italy. We tended not to see that kind of content on our timelines, the most obvious lies almost never made headlines in mainstream media and the whole discourse seemed to remain underground until an article like the one on Buzzfeed showed us that we lived in an ocean of disinformation.

There were two possible explanations for this. The first one was that people like me who lived and worked in mainstream media environment saw only the tip of the iceberg. We lived in a bubble and we were totally disconnected from the real world of real people outside; people who were exposed to this deluge of fake news. "And I used to buy into this idea, and I stated it myself in public events," Mr Zagni concluded.

The second possible explanation was that we did not have a very fine-tuned sense of proportion when we assessed the numbers reached by posts online. More importantly, we liked to dwell on these ideas of the barbarians at the gate, of throngs of people feeding themselves on a very unhealthy diet of bad information and outright lies. But, was it really so? There were some objections.

Firstly, "views" is a very vague term and a very neutral one. We do not know if people who saw an evident lie on the internet, actually believed it or reacted with anger or disgust.

Secondly, there was a lot of research telling us that people tended to distrust the media in general but the news on the internet in particular. A title on a Facebook timeline was probably the news equivalent of junk food, it could be a guilty pleasure but everybody understood that it was unhealthy and should not make it a stable diet.

So his first conclusion was that we should not think that we, the educated and cultivated ones who were addicted to news, were the few good ones and that all the outsiders there were only barbarians, trolls, fake news makers, and so on. A lot of people who came in contact with fake news on the internet probably did not believe it or looked for confirmation or simply did not care. Himself he had seen probably 200 posts on his Facebook timeline this morning and he could not remember a single one of them.

So everything was ok? Not at all.

The point was that sometimes fake news did make it to the headlines or at least to the mainstream discourse and mostly it happened when a politician or media outlet took it seriously - most of the time by mistake. This was the point at which fake news became really dangerous, when it was spread by an authoritative news source. They used to be
called gate-keepers and probably should continue to be called as such. Therefore if none of the main actors fell into the trap of fake news by spreading it, the problem would already partly been solved, Mr Zagni was convinced.

Finally, Mr Zagni proposed two ways of stopping misinformation. The first one came from the top, from authorities and political entities. There was a very strong case to be made that the political institutions did not need to do anything about this problem. Political institutions could mainly play their hand in an indirect way, for instance by promoting more vigorously scientific information, media education in schools, etc.

The fake news problem could not only be resolved from above, ultimately each individual citizen needed to be convinced of the accuracy of what he or she saw on television and read in newspapers.

However, the moment when the institutions gave the slightest impression that they were telling people what they should think or should believe, it would be sure to create stronger opposition towards any position sustained by an official source.

So his second and final conclusion was that we all should stick to the good old ways, which was good journalism and this also meant avoiding any patronising behaviour. "We, in the media, do not need to tell people who to distrust, but must focus on the necessity of rebuilding distrust", he said, adding that he always had looked with admiration to the stance taken by FULLFACT, the British fact-checking project. These people chose not to divine specific statements by politicians but only a set of claims, without order. What was important was not to expose who told lies but to rebuild the trust that made people believe that the truth was elsewhere.

Opening session III
Globalisation of media requires better education

Carmen Comos Tovar introduced her organisation, CEPES, which represented social economy enterprises. Their guiding principle is the priority to people and to social objectives over capital. In her speech she also referred to the communication challenges her organisation was facing, mentioning two:

- Firstly, the globalization of communication required more pedagogy than ever before and forced us to change and adapt our messages. Paradoxically, the overload of information often caused misinformation. This implied the use of all existing communication channels to convey the appropriate messages and to clarify, deny and expand information, so that society, the public authorities and other entities and institutions get the accurate information.

- Secondly, another variable that had a positive and negative effect was the massive everyday flood of information that brought new words to define already-existing and applicable concepts. We were victims of a linguistic marketing that we must confront. This variable forced us to adapt our messages and communication strategies.

Name it: Fake news is just lies

Maria Belovas from the Estonian government which held the EU presidency in the second half of 2017 reported on the progress Estonia had made in e-government, making the government paperless as early as 2000. Now the whole administration was paperless and Estonia saved around 2% of its GDP, which was actually the cost of Estonia’s defence budget. 99% of Estonian services, both public and private sector services, were online, mainly based on an ID card which every Estonian held. There were only three things that one could not do online: getting married, getting divorced, and buying real estate. Otherwise, everything in Estonia was done online, therefore a tax declaration for instance only took around two minutes, and setting up a company in Estonia about a couple of hours.

This progress also helped the government, as people were seeing that it was doing its job. The government was making processes secure and transparent. This was a major step forward for the people and for the economy.

Ms Belovas who is responsible for communication in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that fake news was one of the issues she had to deal with on a daily basis. Rejecting the term fake news or alternative facts or anti-news, she insisted that these were just lies.
Unlike earlier times, when the government was the owner of a lot of information, it had the reputation of being trustworthy and it had the channels to disseminate information, today nearly everybody could put information on platforms. Therefore the government, the private sector, civil society and citizens should work together – crowdsourcing their ideas – in finding a solution to stop the spread of fake news. Instead of finding ways that just lead to more regulation or blocking people, Ms Belovas proposed putting the responsibility on the whole of society and to make sure that audiences and everybody who was communicating in social media was knowledgeable and aware of these threats, knew how to check them, knew which sources to trust and could make an informed decision on what to share with their peers and what not to share.

Civil society needs to respond with facts and figures

Luis Planas said that the best and easiest response to fake news, alternative facts or lies was facts and figures. He believed that society as a whole was key to tackling this challenge. Society and organised civil society were already responding, and he was convinced that organised civil society could help put forward a different perspective on things. He was sure that organised civil society could succeed with a positive approach. It was important not to lose optimism. Civil engagement was the only way to move forward and the past had shown how powerful civil engagement could be. For him, it was a question of how a society confronted challenges like that and civil engagement was key to finding solutions for many of the problems that society was facing today. In this regard, he recommended the book by Alberto Alemanno "Lobbying for change. Your voice to create a better society", which had been presented in December at the EESC.

Panel III: Code of Culture – the driver's licence for social media use?
Luca Jahier introduced this topic by referring to social media, which was intended to provide a vast space for freedom, for democracy, and broader access to news, but was now bypassing the social controls and norms.

“Our open democracies have become more and more a place where hate, violence, xenophobia, extremism, manipulation of the truth are becoming a reality”, he stated. Many journalists, many politicians, other stakeholders or well-known and famous people, but also ordinary people and most sadly also children, had often been victims of bullying, manipulation and polarisation via social media.

On the other hand, there was a demand for positive news and some media had already recognised this. For instance, the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera had just launched a weekly magazine called "Good news". The question that Mr Jahier addressed to the panel was whether we needed a kind of ‘driver’s licence’ for the internet and if we could counteract negative trends with powerful sources such as culture.

Disinhibition in the web thrives on lack of eye-contact and the virality of emotions

Ingrid Brodnig explained that she had been analysing the phenomenon of “online abuse” for quite some time now and found one aspect quite fascinating, namely how easy it was to attract a lot of negative attention, and how easy it was to become a victim and to get very aggressive comments. She gave an example to illustrate her point: Bettina Riha-Fink, a 43 year-old Austrian citizen working for a charity in Austria. She founded a Facebook page called "We help" that assisted refugees and once she had started managing this page she received a lot of aggressive comments about refugees.

A 15 year-old teenage boy from Austria, for example, wrote on her page about refugees, “Let’s put them all together and let’s gas them”. Such comments are illegal in Austria because there were laws against sedition and against inciting violence against minorities. After Ms Riha-Fink had given interviews on how citizens could help refugees she had been targeted, had received unfriendly, even abusive messages until it had come to the point when a man, unknown to her, had written that she should not be surprised if something happened to her children.

Unfortunately, these kinds of messages could be read very often online. Women, from all over the world, received them in particular. It was frightening. In English it was called “silencing”, making another person stop doing or saying certain things. It was a type of bullying, and online bullying nowadays was often politically motivated and tried to make other voices disappear. People wrote awful things online, things hardly ever heard in other situations, for example in a face-to-face discussion.
There were many factors to explain why this happened online, but Ms Brodnig focused on three important reasons, two of them relating to an important theory called "The online disinhibition effect", developed by the psychologist John Suler. He listed behavioural factors which were different online than in face-to-face contact and which led to people being disinhibited, saying things they normally would not say.

One of these reasons was **anonymity**. It was easier to make harsh comments when one was not associated with the comment.

Another important factor in Mr Suler's theory was the **invisibility** on the internet. Since one did not see the other person, important non-verbal signals, like mimic, like how the voice sounded, or like eye contact were missing. More and more it was recognised that those non-verbal signals had a very calming effect, they led to empathy. An experiment carried out by two Israeli scientists had also shown that even eye contact via a webcam softened and made it less easy to attack another person.

The third aspect was that **anger** was a successful strategy, which was also used by political parties. When parties or politicians used anger to engage their own voters, it helped them because angry voters were more likely to go to the polls and cast their votes than non-angry voters, and this could even be measured online: there was an interesting study carried out by the political scientist Timothy Ryan, who put political advertisements on Facebook and those ads stimulated different emotions, for example anger or anxiety, or were more neutral, including a neutral message. It turned out that when a political ad on Facebook made people angry, it led to a much higher click rate – approximately twice as many clicks than when it was neutral. In English such a phenomenon can be described with the sentence "angry people click more". Therefore it was a good strategy for parties and for political provocateurs to make people angry because it brought better results. A good example of this theory was Donald Trump. There was a data analysis of his and Hillary Clinton's Facebook sites carried out by the IT specialist Patrick Martinchek. On average, Donald Trump had 36% more likes, 57% more comments and 34% more shares – supposing that provocative politicians can profit from the angry debates they were triggering.

An important aspect here was **technology**. Because when one had a Facebook profile and read the news there, one did not see all the things that friends were posting. One only saw a fraction, because the algorithm - the software - decided what one would and would not see. Not enough was known about algorithms like Facebook's News Feed, but one important aspect was known: the algorithm favoured engagement. So if one had many likes, many shares, many comments, one had greater reach, and this led to the interesting question of whether the algorithm even favoured anger and other emotions, whether the algorithm helped such posts become more visible.

Another important issue were echo chambers. The problem was that there were very active - for example Facebook groups -, where likeminded people were really firing each other up, affirming each other and the whole debate got very agitated. It was unclear how big such echo chamber effects were and if they were a common problem in the digital debate or just a problem of a small part of the population. Experts feared such echo chambers in which likeminded people were getting fired up, because in the worst case scenario it led to a much polarised debate, a debate in which there was not much understanding of any other opinions.
Management by fear needs to be replaced by management based on trust

Thibault Lesénécal started by quoting the cliché “I think culture is a strategy for breakfast”, which was actually said by Peter Trigger, an American consultant. The reason behind this quote was that Mr Lesénécal had often been asked about the EP’s digital strategy. What was its social media strategy? And these people expected very nice documents that they could read and use.

However, the Parliament did not have a written strategy and Mr Lesénécal was actually against writing one, because he thought that it was more important to work on the culture inside the organisation and on everything the Parliament promoted outside. "If we want to be successful in digital communication and in every culture, you need totems and you need taboos”, he explained.

The first totems at the European Parliament (EP) were based on the consistent communication guidelines established by DG Communication. It defined a brand: "We are the people of Europe". The European Parliament was the only directly elected institution in the European Union. It stood for democratic power and influence, if one had to summarise what the EP members were doing. It also stood for modernity and openness because it was a young parliament, compared with other parliaments that had been established in the 19th and 18th centuries and, in short, it stood for a vibrant parliamentary democracy. So these were the three major totems on which Mr Lesénécal’s team based its communication strategy.

And then there were layers, for instance the values that needed to be applied. They valued democracy in action, people rather than processes, and always tried to emphasise the human side of the Parliament, the work of its members and so on. They were extremely attached to transparency, as the European Parliament's website had almost everything accessible, all the streaming, videos on demand, with all documents usually available in 24 languages.

They needed to be accurate because they wanted to create a bond of trust with their audiences, meaning that if there was a factual mistake, they corrected it immediately. When they covered a debate they gave the floor to all the members. They reported on everything they had to say about all the groups, because they thought that this was important in a democracy, that everyone could be heard. And they tried to be interesting.

In 2008, when they started, their main priority was to be where the people were. They wanted to raise awareness and increase knowledge and engagement. They also wanted to multiply positive encounters with the European Parliament brand - it was not always only about the content, it was also about the perception, for example that was why the EP was on Spotify, which actually was a playlist platform, but because some people would then discover the EP just when listening to some music. They would be surprised that it was the European Parliament and the next time they might even actively look for the EP and listen to it. They tried to do new things and be transparent.

There was a certain style, one perhaps would not expect from an official institution. Also the EP Facebook was a living thing, and it totally changed their level of reach and engagement via social media. But of course there were also taboos. For example, a lot of the EP’s bosses were obsessed with control, but he said "Don't go digital if you don't accept to lose control!"
He agreed that on social media one lost a certain degree of control and not everyone was comfortable with that. Inside the organisation too, they needed to accept to lose some degree of control in order to empower the whole team. It was very important that the people who were on the front line, those who would deal with comments and would post content on social media felt empowered - within certain limits -, but they could not just be executors. *Management by fear needed to be replaced by management based on trust.* The same went for information. Power did not come from keeping information, but from sharing it. It was also important to adjust the tonality. One could not speak the same language on LinkedIn, on Twitter and on Facebook, or Instagram, or Snapchat.

Furthermore, in order to deal with online criticism, a clear moderation policy was needed. It was extremely important that people knew where the limits were. "*Don’t feed the trolls! Never feed the trolls, but rather empower your team*," Mr Lesénécal advised, "*it is important to take care of your team*."

### Make young people critical to social media and include them in Europe’s economy

Alexander Damiano Ricci went straight to the question of whether we needed a code of conduct for social media use and his answer was ‘no’. Instead, he advocated an approach where human activity was put at the heart of any solution to social media problems, such as hate speech, bullying, fake news, etc.

He said that our society unfortunately had never linked one of the big problems of the time, namely the high unemployment rates of the young generation, to the digital evolution of our societies. He thought that if one wanted to solve the digital challenge, it was necessary to make space in our economy for the digital native generation. That meant creating jobs for the young generation in public administration and in media companies. It was necessary to combine the knowledge of older people with the knowledge of the younger generation who had been born into the digital world. This proposal he called the *offer side* of the solution. There was obviously also a demand side of the solution which was related to education.

In Italy, for instance, those three years of *scuola media* were the most important ones for generic knowledge. In those three years, essentially one learned to do maths, to read and to write properly. So Mr Ricci’s question was: why not insert in those three years which were fundamental to the civic education of every citizen a digital course? A digital course, however, did not mean giving everybody an iPad. It was more important to teach a critical approach to the digital world. It was even more important as most of the digital media were private companies: Facebook, Google, etc.

And they drove our discussion, influenced our opinions. In Amsterdam, there was the Digital Methods Initiative, which was a university programme. Richard Rogers who was a professor at the university had written a book entitled *The Digital Methods Initiative*. He was teaching how our consumption of the digital world changed according, for instance, to where we lived: if you typed the same word in Google in Italy or in Spain, you received different results, which meant that some of our discussions were heavily driven by something, what we did not know exactly what it was. Therefore Mr Ricci thought that it firstly was necessary to include digital education, particularly in schools for 12 to 15 year-olds, and secondly to foster the inclusion of the younger generation in the wider economy.
**Blogging needs to go hand in hand with Twitter in order to be heard**

*Jon Worth* spoke about his life as a blogger on European affairs, what made a good blog, and how to build a reputation as a blogger, pointing out that he was a kind of nerd on EU politics. He had been blogging about the European Union for 12 years, and had written 2,200 blog entries and 700,000 words - enough for three books.

His motivation to write his blog had always been discontent with the way the mainstream media covered European Union affairs. He had been determined and convinced that he could do a better job since he had the technical skills and the knowledge of the European Union to start such a blog, and to prove that he could do so.

The difficulty for someone in his situation, however, was that there was no way to ultimately monitor it, which led Mr Worth to the question of how social media interacted with the mainstream media with regard to trust and how filter bubbles could be developed? In her contribution, Ms Brodnig referred to filter bubbles - people talking to each other or building communities of interest on the web with all the negative impact this entails.

The problem was that the mainstream media had also built filter bubbles. And he, as other specialists on a topic, could now shout at/disagree personally with those people. Fifteen years ago, one could only shout at the television, or the radio when disagreeing with what they were saying. Mr Worth reported on an interesting week at Twitter where he had long discussions about German politics with a British journalist. The debate became quite spiteful, but brought Mr Worth in the end 5000 new followers on Twitter, compared to a "normal" week which only brought around 200 to 300 new followers. Since the journalist started to attack him while Mr Worth stayed cool and stuck to his arguments, he succeeded not only in demonstrating the journalist's lack of knowledge but also that the journalist, who was highly respected in society, had lost his cool and at the same time had not behaved well.

A blog, together with Twitter - since blogging and Twitter worked very well together -, Mr Worth said, was the public means that allowed the views of journalists, politicians and opinion formers to be heard. For instance, after the Twitter discussion with the BBC journalist, Mr Worth had been called by British radio stations in order to explain why the BBC journalist's views on German politics had not been correct. Without his blog, he would not be here today and he would not have any influence on politics as an individual person, he confessed.

Regarding the code of conduct, his was a simple one:

- Firstly, he only wrote about things he was familiar with.
- Secondly, if there was an error he corrected it.
- Thirdly, he was transparent about whom he worked for and where his media sources and financial income came from.

On his blog there was a page entitled “Should you trust this blog?” where he outlined his professional background, what he had worked on, and for whom.
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