



# Campaigning for Europe

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## (14) Selling heavy topics: from budget to space policies

9 November, JDE52

**Speaker:** Dr Alexander Winterstein (Deputy chief spokesperson, European Commission), Ilaria D'Auria (Communication and project manager, Network of European Regions Using Space Technologies – NEREUS), Matteo Maggiore (Director for communication, European Investment Bank), Melanie Faithfull Kent (CEO, Hill+Knowlton Strategies)

**Moderator:** Tony Lockett (Head of communications, European Research Council Executive Agency)

**Mr Lockett** opened the session by outlining the different interpretations of 'heavy', and then introduced the four speakers.

**Dr Winterstein** kicked off with an example of a subject viewed as 'heavy' in more ways than one: the EU budget. He gave an overview of some myths (the EU budget is huge, unwieldy, riddled with fraud and corruption) and the divergence between people's expectations and the reality of EU spending, before talking about how to counter such misrepresentation and media demonisation. Good stories, admitted Dr Winterstein, do not make news: *'There are no losers in the EU budget, but try explaining that to someone!'* Nevertheless, rebutting the myths and emphasising the benefits of the EU are the key to dispelling falsehoods. Telling people about things they can easily relate to, such as data protection, roaming and the ban on credit card charges for example, and varying the medium, can make a big difference to their perception of the EU. He stressed how important it was for the EU to tell positive stories that people can relate to, pointing out that, in reality, the EU budget costs each citizen less than one cup of coffee a day. Finally, he shifted the focus to outside the EU: people outside the EU need to be talking about it. Dr Winterstein showed photos of Irish musician Bono and Italian Olympic fencer Elisa di Francisca, both holding the EU flag, to underline the potential influence non-politicians can have on public opinion.

From EU finances to space exploration, **Ilaria D'Auria** introduced the audience to 'downstream' space research and exploration: greater capabilities in areas such as oil-spill detection, monitoring of crops and wildfires, and improving transport, bring the benefits of space exploration palpably down to earth. Although the focus tends to be on the technological prowess of countries or organisations, Ms D'Auria said that our communication should highlight what citizens get out of space exploration in practical terms: *'The technology is not the solution. The solution should be spelled out in terms of benefits.'* She underlined the regional and collaborative aspects of space technology, from universities and research centres processing data, to interregional and



international cooperation on projects – using the example of the Copernicus4Regions programme to show that it was possible and necessary to reach out to the public. Wrapping up, Ms D'Auria drew attention to the existence of a joint space programme as real proof of the potential for cooperation, to make things happen by working together, that one country could not make happen working alone.

With a background in finance, a subject both *'boring, and particularly difficult to make light of'*, **Matteo Maggiore** warned against giving the audience the dreary, minute details of the inner workings of an organisation. Instead, the EU should communicate desired outcomes. Communication is about supply and demand, and institutions must establish a relationship of trust with the audience, and tell people about the things they want to hear about. Mr Maggiore also emphasised the current questioning of the fundamental European principle that *'together we do better'*. He advocated building partnerships and adopting a multilateral approach; giving a simple, straightforward account of the EU's achievements in digestible, communicable amounts of information; and being bold (*'Trustworthy, but bold!'*). This is how the EU can tackle the problem of widely being perceived as distant, at a remove from people's everyday concerns, and how it can counteract the difficulty of interacting with national bodies and stakeholders, who often lack the incentive to praise or acknowledge its achievements. Mr Maggiore summed up by calling on those concerned to be demand-led, bold and local, and to work together!

The session's final speaker, **Melanie Faithfull Kent**, focused on over-simplification, fake news and *'the man with the red tie'*. Communication, according to Ms Faithfull Kent, should help people acquire knowledge, and unlike in school systems based on rote learning, adults learn from experience: analysing information, arguing about it and forming an emotional connection to it. Our communication should therefore mimic an emotional reaction in, or elicit one from, the audience. Ms Faithfull Kent pointed to the increase in the use of infographics and appeals to experiences to communicate about topics or sell products. Take President Trump, for example, – whose political genius is attributed to his unparalleled ability to elicit an emotional response, be it annoyance, amusement or infuriation. This is vital in communication. In the words of Ms Faithfull Kent: *'In a world of pointless, passive downloading, we need to find the connection'*.

After a brief discussion of the pros and cons of plastic bottles, the Q&A session focused on navigating communication in a world of fake news and ever shorter attention spans. **Dr Winterstein** outlined the conundrum fact-based communicators now have to contend with: to either adopt the half-truths and emotions of populism, or maintain a distance with factual, unemotive rebuttals. **Ms Faithfull Kent** cited humour, along with uncertainty, as a very effective emotional connector in communicating authentically, while **Mr Maggiore** said that the institutions really needed to work on *'focused, fast and clear'* communication. In reply to a question about Instagram 'likes', **Ms D'Auria** reminded the audience to be interactive: *'We can all relate to sunsets...we can't all relate to policy'*. Lastly, **Dr Winterstein** reprimanded the EU for its longstanding complacency, not publicising its achievements and acting as a *'punching ball'* for national governments, making it increasingly necessary, as Brexit proves, to answer the question *'What is the EU actually doing for us?'*

To end the session, Mr Locket formulated the take-away: **Offer people experiences that they can relate to rather than bombarding them with facts.**