

Report



1. Date and time: 7 December 2020, 10:30 - 12:00
2. Title of the session: **Opening session - Time for Communication**
3. Format: Opening session
4. Moderator: **Méabh McMahon** (reporter and news anchor, Euronews) / Speakers: **Aura Salla** (Head of EU Affairs, Facebook); **Michael Nathan** (Managing Director, French Government Information Service); **Tom Brooks** (Executive Director, Strategic Communications, European Climate Foundation)

Main topics discussed

The session did not follow a fixed structure, given that all speakers were asked open questions about how their respective companies/organisations had been navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The most notable themes explored were: 1) disinformation and its dangers; 2) the myth of the general public in communication and the prevalence of echo chambers; 3) lessons learned from the pandemic.

Key messages from each speaker

Michael Nathan (Managing Director of the French Government's Information Service)

Key quote:

1. "Expectation is the new currency."

Nathan presented a new paradigm for public sector communication: expectation is the new currency. Indeed, the recent advancements in technology mean that the public has high expectations of their interactions online, from online shopping to streaming on Netflix. The citizen must be at the core of the strategy. The right message to the right people at the right moment.

The pandemic has forced us to adapt and innovate. The French Government's Information Service has focused on three pillars during the pandemic: 1) transparency; 2) immediacy (people were expecting constant communication); 3) addressing a large-scale audience.

Tom Brooks (Executive Director at European Climate Foundation)

Key quotes:

1. "There is no longer a general public in communication. People live in their own information ecosystem."
2. "If this crisis has taught us anything, it is that radical change can happen."

Brooks discussed how, despite the COVID pandemic, climate concerns had not gone away. The EU public remains greatly concerned about environmental issues and supports visionary policies to reduce our carbon

footprint. Concerns about health and the healthcare system, concerns about employment and future financial impact, concerns about the environment: these three issues are the top concerns across EU countries. This trend has intensified post-pandemic. In addition, Brooks argued that the pandemic had increased the credibility of radical change in the public's eyes.

Brooks also noted that there was no longer a general public in communication. Instead, people live in their own information ecosystems or echo chambers. In turn, this renders disinformation much more dangerous. Brooks argued that platforms were the editors of these ecosystems.

Aura Salla (Head of EU Affairs, Facebook)

Key quote:

1. "I don't believe that companies such as Facebook should force people out of their bubbles."

Salla defended Facebook's record during the pandemic as a supporter of the public health community. According to her, millions of COVID-related posts had been removed from the platform in 2020.

Salla also drew on the difference between misinformation and disinformation. While the former is false and inaccurate communication that is shared regardless of intention, the latter is false and misleading communication that is shared with the intention to deceive. Salla argued that it was not always easy to deal with misleading information and that a private company should not be in charge of defining the limits of free speech.

Questions from the audience

The questions were quite specific to the remarks made by the individual speakers. No real debate emerged among panellists.

"Could it be possible for people to be removed from their information ecosystems?"

Salla said that it was not Facebook's responsibility to be in charge of nudging users to interact with others.

"Isn't all politics communication, and all communication politics?"

Nathan agreed. He noted that political input was not his responsibility but that he had to take it into account once it was decided by the government. Politics cannot be ignored.

Takeaway messages

The session was an opportunity to reflect on the panellists' experiences of communication during the pandemic. A mild disagreement emerged regarding the role of platforms in establishing echo chambers. Overall, however, all panellists agreed on the importance of tackling misinformation and that the information age requires communication strategies to adapt to the new landscape (see: "Expectation is the new currency.").