EuroPCom Report : EuroPCom Talks
26 June 2023, 16:15 – 16:45

Speakers:

- Laure Van Hauwaert, *Executive Director EU Institutions, the Government and Public Sector Practice, WPP*
- Rachel Gibson, *Professor of Politics, University of Manchester*
- Fabio Mauri, *Director-General at DG MEME*

Moderator: Anna Gumbau, *Freelance energy and climate journalist and event moderator at Moderating.eu*

A takeaway from the session

With the rise of new technologies and social developments, the very concept of democracy is evolving. It is important to look at democracy from a variety of perspectives in order to communicate it effectively.

Summary of the session

Laure Van Hauwaert: *Democracy through the lens of diversity, inclusion and social cohesion*

Ms Van Hauwaert began by highlighting the importance of diversity, inclusion and social cohesion in building stronger, more resilient democracies. She argued that without these aspects, we could not call ourselves real democracies.

Ms Van Hauwaert drew attention to the WPP Leader's Report, a two-year research study into government communication. It was the only global programme looking at how government officials communicated with the public. She highlighted some of the key findings: less than a third of leaders interviewed felt that they communicated effectively with hard-to-reach communities. Forty percent agreed that engaging with

hard-to-reach audiences was a priority issue but only 6% felt that their organisation provided them with the tools and information needed for this purpose.

The issue of intersectionality was also emphasised, as Ms Van Hauwaert pointed out that many of the people with whom they were trying to engage belonged to multiple marginalised groups. It was key to ensure that the words, images and approaches used spoke to those in marginalised communities, and she pointed out that messages should be designed to promote social cohesion. "*We need to meaningfully embrace diversity*".

Rachel Gibson: *Digital technology and democratic change: from macro- to micro-politics*

Ms Gibson shared some of the findings from a Horizon 2020 project on which she had been working for five years. The project focused on five countries: the US, Poland, France, Germany and the UK. She provided some brief context for the development of the relationship between digital technologies and democracy. In the early years of the internet, practitioners were very hopeful and idealistic in terms of the role of digital technologies in enhancing democracy. That optimism was now dying, with the rise of fake news, hate speech and surveillance capitalism. However, Ms Gibson urged the audience to focus on the "deeper stories" rather than just the symptoms.

Ms Gibson recommended looking at the structural changes occurring in politics as a result of digital technology. She highlighted the difference between what she termed macro-level and micro-level politics. She associated macro-level politics with pre-digital democracy, while post-digital democracy worked at micro-level. Ms Gibson agreed that some forms of micro-politics were important as they helped bring new voices into the political arena, but micro-politics also had flaws: at best, they could be seen as a privatisation of the public space, and at worst as a shift towards a more "narcissistic" take on politics. At macro-level, it was important to ask *"Where is the public voice?"* and *"How does micro-political engagement scale up to meaningful societal change?"* This was where macro-politics was needed and she recommended that political parties manage influencers more effectively at micro-political level and that individuals be exposed to a wider range of news to avoid echo-chamber effects.

Fabio Mauri: *Freedom of speech vs. your feelings: the importance of satire in modern democracies*

Mr Mauri took an unconventional approach to his talk by highlighting the importance of satire in building healthy, critical democracies. "*Satire is designed to make you think, not laugh!*" he explained and pointed out that it was a deeply human phenomenon, with records going back as far as 4000 BC. He also highlighted the role of the court jester, a familiar figure in Medieval courts, who would be asked to share bad or difficult news with the ruler via comedy.

Mr Mauri pointed out that people tended to trust comedians more than politicians: "*Laughter kills fear and without fear we can have no faith*". The issue of faith versus ironic scepticism in politics was central to debates about healthy, democratic societies and the trust that we had or did not have in politicians. Mr Mauri was concerned about what he saw as a growing trend toward political correctness at all costs and an accompanying suspicion of anything that smacks of satire – what he termed "*an allergy to satire*".

As he pointed out, "*the fact that you're offended doesn't make you right*". Mr Mauri's focus on the role of satire in politics and the public sphere more generally spoke to the need for greater tolerance for views that might not be in tune with yours but which nevertheless formed part of the debate, disagreement and critique that were so essential to a healthy democracy.

Quotes

"*Leaders from diverse backgrounds make decisions that better serve citizens. As communicators, we have to develop messages that deliberately support social cohesion*" - **Laure Van Hauwaert**

"*We've moved to a point where there is now a negative view of digital technology in communication – it is now viewed as an instrument of surveillance, disinformation and hate speech. Focusing only on the problems, however, does not show the full picture*" - **Rachel Gibson**

"*Satire does not want to make you laugh, it wants to make you think. It wants to exaggerate problems so you can look at them from a different perspective*" - **Fabio Mauri**