



Who earns the trust of citizens – key findings of global studies

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Speakers: Gurpreet Brar (General Manager, Edelman Public Affairs, Brussels), Anthony Gooch (Communication Director, OECD), Sean Larkins (Director for Consulting and Capability, WPP Government and Public Sector Practice, UK).

Moderator: Phillip Cuisson (Head of Policy Assessment Unit, EESC).

The latest research shows that trust is in crisis in Europe and around the world. The general population's trust in government, media, business and NGOs has declined sharply, turning peoples' hopes into fears. This tendency can also be seen in the considerable gap between perceptions and reality – people tend to overestimate what they worry about. Such tensions in society mean that public communicators need to step outside their traditional top-down roles and find a new, more participatory operating model. How can a broad range of stakeholders be involved in this reconstruction of trust? To what extent are these efforts purely a matter of communication? This session presented the key findings from global studies and offered recommendations for making communications more future-proof.

Phillip Cuisson opened the session by reiterating the central theme of trust, connecting our current "crisis" to the financial crash of 2008 and its aftermath. He emphasised that the restoration of confidence is a key task of communicators and particularly those in government, before giving the floor to the speakers.

Gurpreet Brar began by presenting the Edelman Trust Barometer. This annual study evaluates public trust and political credibility across twenty-eight countries over twenty years. The 2017 edition was entitled "Trust in Crisis". Mr Brar explained that the study showed that public trust was generally decreasing across the political aggregates evaluated (NGOs, governments, businesses and media), to fall at a historically low level since the global economic crisis in 2008. Results also showed that drivers of influence and trust were shifting from top authorities such as states or local governments, to the mass population and social media (as opposed to the informed public), caused also by the lack of media literacy and critical thinking, as well as the rise of fake news and misinformation.

Mr Brar went on to explain that this general decrease in trust was particularly pronounced in the EU. Indeed, the study showed that around 63% of the population of the EU believes that the system is failing them, this feeling being driven further by a sense of injustice, a lack of confidence in the institutions, and a strong incentive for change. Moreover, the results of Edelman's study showed that even in countries that have held elections recently such as France or Poland, trust in the government authority was not bouncing back.

Later, Mr Brar referred to the decreasing trust in traditional media outlets, and the rise of social media as a new source of information. He went on to explain that individuals then shape their own "echo chamber" when receiving information, creating a set of bias through which information is filtered, and which represents a new challenge for communicators trying to rebuild trust.



Consequently, the recommendations to draw from this study on global trust include trying to be "both technocrats and populists", especially as academics and communication professionals are still generally trusted. Mr Brar also recommended delivering all communications through simple and curated language and tone, outlining the support of the institutions for citizens.

Findings from an international organisation were presented by **Anthony Gooch**, from the OECD. Mr Gooch started his presentation by highlighting that trust was the principal driver of influence for an organisation with no legal power as such. Trust is thus based on objective analysis, evidence-based data, a high standard setting and identification of best practices, which leads the OECD to be "entrusted" to act (such as for example developing international tax standards).

In order to rebuild trust in general, better policies should be connected to better lives, and take into account natural human interest in "ends" rather than "means", showcased by the Better Life Index. Communications can play a key role in this, in connecting governments to citizens through the everyday services which citizens appreciate. Beyond the government-citizen connection, Mr Gooch emphasised the challenge of mediators, who can modify a message as it passes from an organisation to its target audience, and leave the institution powerless to correct it. He cited an example from his own organisation, when OECD research was twisted in a piece on Brexit and immigration. Looking for solutions to this and declining trust in general, he suggested a need to use clear, understandable language as well as visual imagery, to measure the real-world impact of policies and to respond to the geography of discontent, aiming to make the process more inclusive and to reduce the psychological distance between the organisation and citizens.

WPP's "The Leaders' Report", presented by **Sean Larkins**, is the first global research report focused on government communications. The findings showed that governments all over the world face the same challenges. Mr Larkins started by saying that government communication faces disintermediation, meaning that the media could be partially excluded from the relation between governments and their people. Among other challenges, Mr Larkins also identified a problem of trust, the growing influence of social media in the diffusion of fake news, and a lack of understanding by public communicators of their audience, which leads to a decreasing level of influence. In that context, he noted that institutional communication should not focus primarily on outputs, but on outcomes.

Mr Larkins also observed that we have moved from an age of deference to one of proximity, referring as Mr Brar had to echo chambers and our increasing reliance on mobile phones and social media. The implications of this are wide-ranging for government communications professionals, and mean that traditional skillsets must be reviewed to reflect current technological change and rapidly decreasing trust.

Following the comments from the three panellists, **Mr Cuisson** opened the floor for questions. Answering a question on the use of language such as "post-truth" and "post-democracy", **Mr Brar** emphasised that the reports presented show that our current situation is "turbo-charged" and needs to be understood, whilst **Mr Larkins** defended the



use of this potentially alarming terminology by pointing out that it is the language of our times, and originated from the respondents of the survey rather than its authors. Our situation of disconnection from politics is reflected in our terminology, and only by using and defining it can we understand it.

Finally, a set of questions to the panel asked about how to select one key message for the EU institutions arising from the studies presented and their work in general – what could the EU do to increase trust? **Mr Gooch** responded that the EU should focus more on the ends, whilst all the while robustly calling out untruths related to what the EU does. According to **Mr Larkins**, the focus of European institutions should be on the tangible proven impact and benefits for individuals, and not hiding behind jargon. **Mr Brar**'s message focused on those working in the field, highlighting the need for representatives of the EU to be natural and honest, as well as calling for increased diversity in the institutions.

Mr Cuisson finally wrapped up the session by advising the audience to: look at the final products, consider the evidence and "be the man your dog thinks you are."