

Storytelling: a tool for reaching other filter bubbles? (Ideas Lab)**10 November 2017**

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This Ideas Lab was fully participatory, designed to give everyone in the room a voice on the key issues addressed by the session and to produce actionable outcomes, using the collective storytelling and World Café formats. Thanks to developments in the digital world, many of us find it easier to communicate and align with like-minded organisations and individuals. However, the same enabling technologies may trap us in so-called "information silos". How can we reach out to other "echo chambers" and ensure that our message is not only heard but understood as well?

As an introduction to this Ideas Lab, **Friso Wiersum** explained the concept of ***The Idea Camp***, a three-day incubator workshop gathering creative and innovative ideas from across Europe and neighbouring countries. The Idea Camp is an inspirational work and meeting place, allowing people to develop their ideas, to connect and exchange with representatives of different professions and fields of expertise, to share knowledge and explore new visions, synergies and alternatives. The main purpose of the Ideas Lab workshop on storytelling was the same – to bring people together, create a sparkle and let them come up with completely new and innovative solutions in communication.

The purpose of the Lab was to collectively share and compare experiences and good practices in communicating with people from outside of our "echo chambers". **Vytenis Kviklys**, communication specialist at the EC Representation in Lithuania, presented a successful project developed in Lithuania to the participants. In 2016, Lithuania launched a social media project called "Friend request" inviting the social media community to meet immigrants and learn about each other while doing leisure activities together. Meetings were filmed and shared by social media influencers, but also picked up and broadcasted by traditional media later on. Despite significant contradictions surrounding the topic in society and a generally negative perception of immigration from third countries in Lithuania, the project has managed to reach three times more people than forecast and has received more positive feedback than initially expected.

The audience was then divided into groups to discuss their impressions and conclusions on how we can open up to other echo chambers and learn from others.

During the discussion, participants generally agreed that there are immense difficulties as well as a lack of will to engage with those who are radically different from us. As a solution, curiosity was acknowledged to be one of the main drivers in branching out of one's own echo chamber. A proactive approach and ideas such as "knocking on doors" and "trying to be a guest in others' echo chambers" are perhaps the best way to summarise the direction to be taken. An initiative to invite a person with a different opinion for a lunch or a coffee spread quickly among the participants as a first step in going beyond our comfort zones and many were very keen to put this idea into practice.

One of the groups pointed out that common ground is essential when trying to reach to other echo chambers. Common activities should be a starting point in order to narrow the gaps and break the ice in a simple, natural and non-invasive way. Creating relationships based on trust and a pleasant



atmosphere, being emphatic and tolerant, as well as sharing our emotions and feelings sincerely could help us to overcome stereotypes and accept different opinions or visions.

Asking open questions and listening without judgement should be the two main rules we need to follow when confronting people with an opposing opinion. Participants agreed that it was critical to comprehend the context and the other person's circumstances. Negative opinions are usually a result of one's fears, concerns and insecurities and it's essential to understand them in order to overcome obstacles in communication. Trying to look behind words and verbal expression and listening without judgement were among the proposed solutions.

At another table, more attention was paid to one's own context and understanding of one's own echo chamber. It was considered necessary to know where you start "*opening up*" from, in order to be able to then make a conscious effort to branch out from this "*bubble*". Participants suggested an exercise in mapping people with different opinions, following them and understanding the reasons behind their views. A radical proposal came from the storyteller Vytenis Kviklys who supposed that it might be interesting to create various identities on social networks in order to be able to embrace different views and opinions.

Travelling (alone) was mentioned, among other ways, as a means of breaking out of echo chambers' borders. Participants agreed that travelling allowed the opportunity to learn about other cultures and engage with people with different beliefs, while being in a new, unfamiliar environment, which in many cases presumes a higher degree of open-mindedness and cultural sensitivity.

After two 20-minute sessions, between which participants swapped discussion tables, moderators asked each one to write down their single main take-home point from the session – i.e. the idea that each participant will try to implement to open up his or her echo chamber. Answers were then gathered and grouped. Thus, as a result, two trending threads were identified:

- **Ask more questions**, including a broad range of ideas such as being more empathic, reacting to anger with love, trying to listen carefully before starting to talk, being sensitive to others as well as focus on general atmosphere rather than words themselves.
- **Invite a person with different opinion to a lunch**, an idea appreciated by the majority of participants. This initiative was further developed with variations such as "*invite a complete stranger*" or "*go out with a stranger*" or even "*go to a place that you have never been to with a person you have never met and do things you have never done*".

At the same time, two participants came up with two ideas that did not in any way correlate with the major threads. One proposed using negative messages, especially those on social media, as an impulse for a research as well as a driver to open up an echo chamber; another idea was an already mentioned "play" with identities on social media.