Know your target: behavioural insights and audience perspectives
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Speakers: Ian Vollbracht (researcher, Joint Research Centre, European Commission), Frits Spangenberg (founder of Motivaction Research & Strategy, The Netherlands), Alex Aiken (Executive Director of Government Communication, UK Government)

Moderator: Marco Incerti, Director of the Communication Service, European University Institute, Italy

Understanding your audience is vital when it comes to communicating your project. More often than not, however, public institutions continue to focus on what they want to say and how they want to say it. They rarely stop to consider what the audience wants to hear or how they want the message delivered. By adding behavioural insights and audience perspectives to the communication toolkit, public communicators can gain valuable insights into more engaging and effective communication that drives change and helps cut through the noise. The purpose of this workshop was thus to learn more about how to reach across the chaos and establish effective communication with your audience.

Ian Vollbracht, from the European Commission's science and knowledge service, started the session with a topical presentation on the role of big data in communication. Big data describe large datasets that are often derived from the activities of users on online platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Complex algorithms allow us to deduce information about larger groups of people from these datasets. This method has been used in several US election campaigns to target specific groups of people by tailoring campaign content to their expectations. For instance, individuals classified by the algorithm as conservative, religious pro-life supporters would receive a different campaign advert than individuals identified by the algorithm as liberal, atheist and pro-choice. Taking this method a step further, it can also be applied on a personality trait level: introverts, for instance, might receive different information to extroverts.

In December 2016, several newspapers reported on the powerful and hence dangerous nature of big data if abused or used in unethical ways. These articles connected so-called big data mining with Trump's win in the 2016 election. In the wake of this debate, Mr Vollbracht and his team of lawyers, big data experts and journalists explored the impact of big data in the specific context of political campaigns, and found that at this point the impact of big data on psycho-targeting of voters is still limited.

In the second part of his presentation, Mr Vollbracht discussed first the role of images, and second the role of emotions in policy communication. He then drew important conclusions for communicating policy ideas. Since we are overloaded with information, images function more effectively in conveying information as they are easier to process. He thus recommended making more use of visual information, i.e. to always accompany text with images. Moreover, images are more closely tied to our emotions. Indeed, according to psychological and neurobiological research findings, whilst text might only reach individuals at a superficial level, images can reach them at a deeper level, and so might have a more profound, long-lasting impact. Mr Vollbracht illustrated the idea using the iceberg example - facts within a message are only the small part of the iceberg that lies above the surface. Underneath the surface, however, lie emotions, heuristics and values. In order to reach people, we need to tap into these more deep-rooted channels of communication. This idea explains the recent success of right-wing populists across Europe and the United States. Liberal forces tend to communicate facts more, whilst right-wing populists' communication more frequently triggers the public's emotions. Mr Vollbracht concluded by recommending using the brain whilst making policies, but using the heart and emotions whilst communicating them.

Next, **Frits Spangenberg**, expert in audience classification at Motivaction International, took a critical look at the overall support of citizens for the EU and how it might be related to the way in which EU agencies communicate with the population. Throughout the past decade, support for the EU has decreased to an alarming degree. Mr Spangenberg thus offered a few considerations behind this trend linked to

communication. He asserted first of all that EU institutions are currently notably failing to communicate all the positive developments that are related to the EU, and instead tend to emphasise the potential drawbacks. As an example, he referred to the cumbersome "due to EU regulations" signs often found at airports that seem to convey the message that EU membership primarily brings a host of restrictions. Rarely do we see signs that point out all the advantages related to EU membership. Moreover, Mr Spangenberg explained, the current EU communication strategy relies only on the top of the iceberg. Specifically, it conveys facts efficiently through facts and numbers, but does not engage the audience on a more primal, emotional level.

Mr Spangenberg further encouraged communicators to take a closer look at the specific sub-groups within the audience. In this regard, demographic variables such as age or gender are less relevant. Rather, communicators need to take into account individuals' core values, potentially manifested in their political attitudes. Most importantly, there is a need to distinguish between EU supporters (23%), EU sceptics (21%), and the EU silent majority (56%). This is important as there is a need to communicate different stories to these different groups. Furthermore, our communication efforts should be focused on the silent majority as they are more likely to change their minds than EU sceptics. Mr Spangenberg concluded that if the EU does not critically review and enhance their communication strategies by targeting emotions and drawing more attention to the advantages related to the EU, it might not survive.

The final speaker, **Alex Aiken**, reported on the United Kingdom's behaviour change strategies for communication. He recommended walking in the audience's shoes for a while and inquiring about their specific interests. It is useful to use this initial hook to engage the audience in a conversation which might then lead to a conversation about the information which you want to convey. Further advice he gave was to avoid "broadcasting" in the place of communication: the aim should be to listen twice as much as you talk.

Finally, Mr Aiken outlined two broad frameworks that might help to design more effective communication. First, he introduced the MINDSPACE framework, which highlights factors determining how individuals perceive a message. As communicators, it is important to take these factors into consideration when designing a message. The framework breaks down as follows:

- **M**essenger: Who communicates the information?
- **I**ncentives: What do I gain from it?
- **N**orms: What do others do?
- **D**efaults: What are the pre-set options?
- **S**alience: What is novel and relevant?
- **P**riming: What occupies our subconscious?
- **A**ffect: What emotional associations are there
- **C**ommitments: What have we promised publicly?
- **E**go: What actions make us feel better about ourselves?

The complementary EAST model proposes that messages need to be easy, attractive, conveyed with social proof, and timely. Mr Aiken illustrated this model by referring to a recent NHS campaign aiming at staying healthy throughout the winter. The poster's implicit message was easy ("Do regular health checks."), attractive ("We offer fast service."), delivered with social proof ("Other people also get health checks."), and timely ("This is the time when you might ill.").

To conclude, the three speakers agreed that it is crucially important to consider the audience's perspective on a topic, especially if this audience is very different from yourself. It is also essential to target an audience that is open to the message, and to tailor the message to fit your audience. Most importantly, EU communication can no longer remain on the factual level; we need to learn from other communicators and employ more methods that involve emotional pathways.

Mr Incerti then opened the floor for questions and debates. A first set of questions inquired about how to introduce new and innovative ideas on social media and communication strategies. According to Mr Aiken, a useful approach is to present data and survey results to senior management, in order to show insights into the potential results of those campaigns. **Mr Spangenberg** and **Mr Vollbracht** agreed, and added that the ability to take leadership and initiatives was fundamental for communicators.

Another set of questions asked how to communicate with young people – especially in the context of the EU elections – and what techniques and strategies are effective in reaching people's emotions. **Mr Aiken** recommended first of all studying the audience and walking in their shoes. When addressing young people, he also advocated three means of communication: audio-visual messages, the use of trusted people (such as celebrities), and the ability to give young people a social purpose by voting. Finally, the last question explored how to address fake news. **Mr Aiken** recommended addressing it by using facts and data to call them out. **Mr Vollbracht** however recommended ignoring it, to prevent it gaining and increasing the size of its audience.