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(10) Public institutions' visual communication: How to unleash creativity?

8 November, JDE62

Speakers: Anca Scortariu (Head of the Visual Communication Sector, DG Communication, European Commission), Arlin Bagdat (Director-General for External Communication at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Belgium), Yoeri Albrecht (curator of the Forum on European Culture and Director at De Balie), Susanne Weber (Head of Digital Communication, Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union)

Moderator: Daniela Vincenti (Spokesperson and Strategic Communication Adviser to the President, European Economic and Social Committee)

There was a prevailing assumption that the public sector lacked creativity and skills in visual communication, specifically compared to the private sector. Did this truly reflect the current state of public institutions' approach to visual communication? Were bodies in the public sector more reserved when it came to producing visuals? This workshop aimed to refute such claims by pointing to examples of successful visual campaigns within the public sector.

The moderator, **Daniela Vincenti**, opened the session by recounting her own experience of unleashing the creative potential of graphic designers by allowing them to be original in their productions. She then went on to introduce the panellists before handing the floor over to them.

Anca Scortariu started her speech by presenting a video compilation of visuals produced by the European Commission. She believed that the visual community at the European institutions had the power to appeal to both the hearts and the minds of citizens. Ms Scortariu listed three steps that she deemed to be key for delivering powerful visuals. Firstly, it was important to invest in professional visual communication, to build in-house knowledge of graphic design and to trust designers. Secondly, the visual community should facilitate ideas outside the EU bubble in order to get to know its diverse audiences. Thirdly, collaboration among people with various backgrounds led to high quality and original creations. Ms Scortariu ended her presentation by showcasing a selection of successful EU campaigns and pointed to the fact that graphic design did not need to take digital form, but could also draw on traditional off-screen techniques.

Arlin Bagdat's presentation introduced the "Belgium. Uniquely Phenomenal" campaign. The campaign aimed at improving the image of Belgium, both at home and abroad, in order to attract more tourists and investors following the attacks in March 2016. Ms Bagdat presented various examples of visuals representing the



campaign both online and offline. She emphasised the importance of federal and private partners in engaging wider audiences. For instance, the image of Belgium in China had been improved by inviting Chinese journalists and influencers for a 3-day trip to Belgium. By engaging with Chinese influencers, the campaign had been able to reach millions of people. According to the numbers presented by Ms Bagdat, the campaign had managed to attract even more visitors to Belgium than in the years before the attacks.

The third speaker, **Susanne Weber**, began her speech by addressing the main challenges of communications for the Austrian Presidency. Firstly, 6 months was a very limited timeframe in the communication sector. As such, there was not enough time to prepare content. Secondly, it was difficult to identify faces that could be associated with the presidency. The presidency was represented by many people, but no one in particular. Thirdly, the presidency was a difficult topic for audiences to comprehend in general. Ms Weber compared her work in the private and public sectors and identified the key differences between the two. On the one hand, the public sector lacked both financial and professional resources. On the other hand, it was easier to attract media attention for important topics. She finished her presentation by highlighting the core aspects of online communication: keep it short and simple, engage in social media series, show behind the scenes and prioritise your channels.

In contrast to the previous panellists, **Yoeri Albrecht** pointed out that he was not an employee of public institutions, nor did he work in communications. He introduced his place of work, De Balie, a cultural and art "centre for ideas" located in the Netherlands. Mr Albrecht explained that when he had organised the first Forum on European Culture, his aim had been to show that Europe were more than just institutions. Instead, he saw Europe as a philosophical and cultural idea. Pointing out that European culture was older than the EU, Mr Albrecht believed that Europe was shaped by artists and thinkers. In his introduction, Albrecht stressed the importance of showing culture rather than telling it. In other words, it was essential to give real artists space and to trust them. To illustrate, he talked about the play "[Re]Thinking Europe", which consisted of extracts of political speeches, and about the highly emotional impact the play had had on audiences. Albrecht ended with an appeal not to leave Europe to economists and politicians, but to draw on creativity.

During the Q&A with the audience, different issues were discussed. In order to break free from conventionality and unleash creativity, it was necessary to work with professionals (artists, designers, etc.) and to trust them in their work. The European communications community should reach out beyond the EU bubble and learn about their audiences. There should be collaboration between people from different backgrounds. Experts should not work in isolation. Instead, they should engage with each other. Involving more people in content creation prevented mistakes. Nevertheless, it was important to realise that communication in the public sector was constrained by law. It therefore could not be completely free. There would always be rules that had to be followed, e.g. the verification of information. According to Mr Albrecht, wider audiences could not be reached simply by producing content for communication. Instead, it was important to focus on creating something new within the transnational European culture. **Ms Scortariu** stressed that public communication, unlike art, was not supposed to generate questions. Instead, it was meant to provide answers to difficult issues (e.g. explain the financial framework).

Ms Vincenti closed the session by stating: "**When there is a vision behind a visual, it is easy to convey the message**".