



## EuroPCom session report

### Selling Heavy Topics 2.0

Thursday, 7 November, 11h15-12h45

**Speakers:** **Stefaan de Rynck**, Senior Advisor of Michel Barnier, Chief EU Negotiator for Brexit, European Commission; **Marcin Monko**, Team Leader Media, European Research Council; **Jessica Craig**, Senior Health Improvement Officer, NHS Health Scotland

**Moderator:** **Svetla Tanova-Encke**, Coordinator of the European Science-Media Hub in the Scientific Foresight Unit, European Parliamentary Research Service

*Last year we discussed how to communicate heavy topics, from the budget to space policies – but there is more! Therefore, we are bringing together experts on controversy as well as experts from the interface of science and communication once again to give you further insights on how to convey simple messages on complex political or technical issues and how to create a buzz around scientific discoveries. Be there and add your own perspective to the debate!*

**Stefaan De Rynck** gave some insights in his daily work of communication around Brexit. The EU knew it would have to deal with "heavy topics" here and tried to steer away from controversy as much as possible. There were fears the EU27 would capitalise on Brexit to sell their own anti-EU platforms. However, we have moved on from this. Mr De Rynck shared **four points that he has learnt from the Brexit process: unity, transparency, repetition and careful use of words**. He adds that political unity and unity of purpose is vital. The EU27 need to stay together to make an impact, avoiding blame and controversy. Also an unprecedented transparency was needed, with a push for televised public debates in national parliaments. In addition, he states that the repetition of core messages is key to convey them. This helped create clarity with regard to a complex issue. As an example, Barnier used a single, simple slide to show the EU position clearly. Barnier was always careful not to say too much and chose his words carefully. He gave paced, slow key speeches, and knew when to stop talking.

The second speaker, **Jessica Craig**, raised the point that the rise of social media has led to the spread of misinformation and a fear of vaccines. People do not vaccinate due to complacency, confidence and convenience. Communication about vaccination is key. Thus, understanding key audiences and considering specific needs and attitudes is vital. Scotland has a high percentage of vaccinations, which is

due to good key understanding. However, Polish immigrants vaccinate a lot less, due to social media influences on Polish communities. When tackling misinformation, ensure your communication is reliable and evidence-based, with key, simplified messages – but do not oversimplify, as your target audience needs information to make an informed choice.

**Marcin Monko** was in charge of the coordinated release and communication around the first picture of a black hole. He said that in trying to sell a complex scientific project to the public, it is vital to branch out and collaborate across the EU institutions. He left the participants with some advice:

- Claim ownership of the story – the Black Hole project discussed was EU funded, thus the EU had to be the messenger of news. The press conference was therefore held in Brussels.
- Make sure all reporters and partners mention the EU contribution and that you have the best audio-visual content easily available for media outlets.

In this example, it worked: the Commission had the most watched live video, most engaged tweet and Instagram post, over 1000 mentions in the press, a full house at the Berlaymont press room, and a live broadcast on BBC and 90 other stations. Topics like this have the potential to be boring and complicated. It could have been ridiculed or ignored, or used as satirical poke at EU. It was a risk – but it paid off due to good preparation.

It is also crucial to contain the story beforehand. Mr Monko was very worried about a leak, as the campaign relied on suspense. It was not sent to press and there was limited access to images. Key aspects were: partnerships, suspense, preparation and research.

He also urged the audience to not underestimate people's ability to be inspired. People saw this as a scientific breakthrough. We should not underestimate curiosity-driven science's power to inspire – it can help to project the EU positively. As for the future, Mr Monko said that it is hard to know where the discovery will come from. You need to establish trust with people in key positions and to sustain relationships to get important information well in advance.

### ***Key take-aways from the Q&A***

- ***Stefan De Rynck***: media forms are important: twitter can be used, as messages are very powerful when condensed. Barnier could therefore do impromptu press statements on the move.
- ***Jessica Craig***: emotions are effective but dangerous. Messages such as those against vaccination push purely on emotions. The NHS vaccinations project therefore emphasises what happens if you do not vaccinate. We do not touch anti-vaccination comments on social media, as they often do not want to engage in scientific debate. However, addressing their comments can sometimes be beneficial – when doing so we are polite, brief and we do not engage in debates.
- ***Marcin Monko***: pick your battles. Complex topics can be the best way to represent science and can sometimes resonate very well with the public. The ERC has a public communication award for funded scientist grantees and is training these grantees in media relations. It is important to maintain communication between the scientific world and the public.
- ***Stefan De Rynck***: we should explain as human beings what we do, what we work on and why. The Leave campaign had better slogans – "take back control" was an actionable slogan, "better together" was a simple statement. We can learn something from the Leave campaign. We need personalised communication, for civil servants to become less anonymous and speak about what they are doing.

- **Marcin Monko:** we need emotions to attract attention, but today that is a difficult task. We need emotions and facts both together. It is important to have a buffer of facts between raw emotions, as it makes you stronger. Many people are worried about misinformation and want clear evidence.
- **Jessica Craig:** trust levels between professionals and the public must be high. Emotion leads to 95% of decision making. We need therefore to ensure we evoke emotions.
- **Marcin Monko:** we are not in a post-truth society. However, people confuse ease of access to information with knowledge. Ben Ferringa said, "you can't cure cancer with opinion". You need evidence here – facts. The EU is good at this. The information can be digestible or humorous but must be delivered.
- **Jessica Craig:** media must also focus on positive news, as good news spreads.