



From Global to Local: Lessons from Communicating TTIP

21st October 2016

Speakers: Lutz Güllner (Head of Unit for Information, Communication and Civil Society at European Commission, DG Trade), Lora Verheecke (Researcher and Campaigner at Corporate Europe Observatory), Markus Töns (Member of Parliament for North Rhine-Westphalia and Member of the European Committee of the Regions)

Moderator: Daniela Vincenti (Editor-in-Chief at EurActiv.com)

Daniela Vincenti introduced the session by outlining the background to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Negotiations began in 2013, but before this there was a lengthy scoping exercise to prepare the ground. Since 2014 the media focus has been on opposition to TTIP, and more recently CETA, but TTIP is only a symptom of a broader challenge – how to communicate trade as a whole. For many actors in the debate, TTIP has become a synonym for globalisation and the drive to strengthen sovereignty, and perhaps also to save democracy itself.

Lutz Güllner, as the first speaker, agreed that the issue is no longer confined to TTIP. He pointed out that the debate cannot be reduced to communications alone, as there is always a mix of politics and political forces which are closely interlinked with the question of communication. Taking a step back, he started off with a reflection on what the new elements are in this debate which are triggering this unprecedented level of controversy.

First, the debate itself has new forms, and new means and styles of campaigning. Second, there are vast differences between Member States in terms of the issues at stake and the intensity of the debate. This is a challenge for Brussels, as it must communicate to 28 debates simultaneously. Third, this is a debate which is not always based on facts, as emotions and sweeping statements have come to the fore.

Furthermore, Mr Güllner suggested that there are several reasons why the debate has become so intense. First, echoing Ms. Vincenti's opening comments, TTIP per se is not the issue – the concern is about globalisation, in terms of winners and losers and how to stay in control. Second, people's opinions about the USA have an effect, and the public often wonders how one can cooperate on regulatory issues when the USA has basically no regulations. This is not necessarily true, but it is a prevalent view. Third, there is an element of scepticism vis à vis the European institutions. It is particularly alarming that the

European Parliament is not seen as being able to guarantee democratic oversight. Finally, the TTIP debate is in many ways an elite-sceptical debate.

The challenge for institutional communicators is to communicate in this complex environment. A trade agreement is usually deemed positive on the basis of the macro-economic effects it will produce, such as a medium-term strengthening of competitiveness, etc. These macro-economic effects do not provoke a lot of emotions, whereas the opponents point to potential negative consequences, which often are emotionally provocative. However, this is not to say that institutions should seek to engage on emotional terms. In contrast, the approach taken by the EU is characterised by information, explanation and transparency.

Communication can nonetheless be improved by moving from the macro to the micro level, and explaining what the agreement actually does for individuals and small entities. It is also important to work with the network in Member States, because communication from an ivory tower in Brussels does not work. Mr Güllner also noted that in this debate, how business and academia position themselves is very relevant. Communication that comes only from an institution or government incites the criticism that this is an elite project, because only elites defend it.

Lora Verheecke took a different perspective on the debate. She noted that her organisation focuses on lobbying and transparency, and do not consider themselves anti-European. They do not believe that globalisation is the main issue in the TTIP debate, and they try to keep to the facts. They have focused in particular on two chapters, on investment and regulatory cooperation, but she emphasised that she wanted to consider the communication aspect rather than the content of the deal.

She showed a short presentation outlining their target audience, main messages and means of communication, before showing a number of powerful videos and infographics that they have used in their campaign. They do not feel their communication is emotional, but they do make an effort to reach out to people who are not usually interested in trade or what goes on in Brussels.

Markus Töns noted that Germany is one of the more complicated cases when it comes to the TTIP debate. As rapporteur for TTIP at the European Committee of the Regions, he described the CoR's position as 'yes, but.' In other words, the deal is possible but there must be certain provisos. He noted that in a recent newspaper article, a social psychologist had argued that the anti-TTIP campaign was so successful because too little had been done to allay people's concerns, but Mr Töns took the opposite view – that in fact TTIP had been the subject of far more public discussion than other trade deals, for example that with Vietnam. He suggested that a deep-seated anti-Americanism was at the core, echoing MrGüllner's point.

Mr Töns also noted that these types of agreement are too complex to be discussed in black and white terms, and that it is crucial to retain the capacity for nuance in our communications. He did not think it was possible to conduct negotiations in the public arena, but suggested that every time a chapter is consolidated it should be made available for public debate. He also emphasised the importance of the European Parliament as a representative democratic institution, and suggested that the scope of this

role should be broadened. Finally, he warned against tarring all opponents to TTIP or CETA with the same brush – not every critic of European policy is anti-European or a bigot.

Daniela Vincenti then offered her perspective, noting that the Lisbon Treaty provided for additional scrutiny at the national level which has not manifested in reality. While the European Parliament has done a lot of work on TTIP, the problem is to relate these issues back to the level of national parliaments. Civil society also needs to be involved from the very beginning of the process, but equally, the European Commission has done a lot of good work in opening up the process to more transparency. From a communication perspective, she noted that no one was trying to highlight the cost of *not* having TTIP. There was a lack of pro-TTIP campaigners, especially among SMEs, who have a vested interest in TTIP. Finally, she emphasised the need for intercultural communication, because although Europe is a single market its cultural perspectives on the issues that face us are still very diverse.

The floor was then opened to questions from the audience. It was asked whether the post-fact communication landscape put institutions at a disadvantage, given that for reasons of protocol and credibility they must stick to policy and facts. **Ms Verheecke** admitted that opponents have an advantage in this respect, although she pointed out that they use simple messages as entry points rather than ends in themselves, while **Mr Güllner** commented that this disadvantage applied not only to TTIP but to EU communications in general – the EU is a very rational project, which makes it difficult to appeal to something that goes beyond number-crunching. **Mr Töns** added that social media poses a problem, because people create their own media content and virtual realities develop which often have little basis in fact. In terms of pro-TTIP campaigning from other sources, Mr. Töns and a number of audience members recounted that in their experience there was little consensus among SMEs, making it very difficult to articulate a position.

Finally, **Ms Vincenti** closed the session by asking each speaker what they would have done differently. **Mr Töns** responded he would recommend all Member States to make everything public from the outset. **Mr Güllner** said that he would not have stayed at the macro-level, but would have used tangible examples of benefits earlier in the debate. Finally, **Ms Verheecke** offered that she would have created simple documents in more languages, as they had too many big and complex reports which left space for emotional campaigning that was not always fact-based.