

Meeting reports

Expert forum “Democracy in a Digital Society”

24 January 2019, Berlin, Germany

The expert forum “Democracy in a Digital Society – Trust, Evidence and Public Discourse in a Changing Media Environment” was organised by Erika Widegren (Chief Executive of Re-Imagine Europa) and All European Academies (ALLEA, the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities) at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. The major objective of the conference was to discuss the most pressing questions linked with the effects of digital transformation on democratic institutions, not only in the European Union. The discussions focused on the problem of fake news spreading on social media, which more and more often exert a powerful influence on democracy and results of elections. The outcomes of this meeting will form the basis for the “Roadmap for a New Model of the Digital Information Ecosystem”, i.e. concrete recommendations on what should be done in Europe in the next five years.

During the opening session, Professor Martin Grötschel (the host of the meeting) welcomed all participants and focused on the history of the place of the meeting, whereas Professor Antonio Loprieno (President of ALLEA) explained that the technological progress and gradual switch from printed to digital publications and from individual knowledge to community knowledge had opened amazing possibilities but also had given rise to many serious threats. The session ended with a moving speech by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (President of Re-Imagine Europa, former President of France). He emphasized that many citizens cannot see the aim of Europe anymore, so it is crucial to provide a clear new vision for Europe and to restore trust based on mutual and reciprocal understanding.



Speech of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, President of Re-Imagine Europa, former President of France. (Photo by Lioba Keuck, reproduced by courtesy of Re-Imagine Europa)

In the following keynote lecture, Professor Manuel Castells (Chairman of the Re-Imagine Europa Taskforce on Democracy in a Digital Society) spoke about the current crisis of the EU, which poses a threat to the political and fiscal

system but also undermines the legitimacy of democracy in Europe. Because of the rapid spread of misinformation and manipulation, the power of surveillance and security institutions is insufficient.

Mariya Gabriel (European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society) in her keynote speech explained that, in response to the increasing polarization of politics, we should focus on our common strengths, as we are stronger together. Open democratic society is based on open debate, transparency, diversity, credibility, inclusiveness, and education. Fake accounts and bots are extremely dangerous, as they threaten the freedom of informed choice, so high-quality information should be given more visibility.

During a plenary discussion, Professor Maria João Rodrigues (Member of the European Parliament), Professor Manuel Castells, and Anthony Gooch (Director of Public Affairs and Communications at OECD) stressed that we need to update our mindset and use law to set new standards. Consultations and participatory democracy are crucial. In analogy to consumer protection (initiated in the 1960s), we now badly need a system of voter protection.

In the following keynote speeches, Baroness O’Neill of Bengarve (Co-chair of the ALLEA Working Group Truth, Trust and Expertise and former President of the British Academy) focused on public reason in a digital age, whereas Professor Christiane Woopen (Chair of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies) concentrated on values as a dwindling source of democracy.

During the second plenary discussion, Baroness O’Neill and Professor Woopen were joined by Lambert van Nistelrooij (Member of the European Parliament), Professor Ed Noort (Co-Chair of the ALLEA Working Group Truth, Trust and Expertise), and Professor Žiga Turk (expert in Internet science). Professor Turk emphasised that in the past the system of mass media was aristocratic, controlled by the elites. The question is if we can now do without intellectual “aristocracy”, when commercial companies and spies from hostile states use fake news, and undermine democracy.

Parallel sessions, which took place in the afternoon, were concerned with: citizen engagement, role of media, ethics of balancing the Internet, legal regulations, impact on elections, data and artificial intelligence, importance of narratives, and trust. As a long-term EASE Council member, I represented EASE at the forum, so I participated in the session “Narratives: Trust in Governance, Science and Expertise”. Giovanni La Placa (Joint Research Centre of the European Commission) presented alarming data about the rise of populism and decline of democracy in many countries and quoted Donald Tusk’s words “If the only thing on our side is knowledge, we will lose. [...] We need leaders who can use the potential of emotions to defend our fundamental values.” Professor Andrzej Nowak (sociologist,

University of Warsaw) presented results of his research team, confirming the crucial role of narratives in public discourse. Volker Stollorz (Chief Editor and Managing Director of the German Science Media Centre) stressed that it is crucial to protect the current system of free journalism and warned that if people do not value freedom, their children will probably no longer have it. At the end of the session I drew the attention of the audience to the problem of the decreasing quality of scientific publications, which contributes to reduced public trust in science and scientists. As Erick García-García (an EASE member) rightly put it during a recent discussion on our ListServ email forum: “If we do not stop the current trend of publishing low-quality texts, in a couple of decades scientific texts will be accessible only to the super-specialists who do not need to read the text to understand the science of a particular paper.”

In the final plenary session, chairs of parallel sessions (Brando Benifei, Christophe Leclercq, Professor Gloria Origi and Professor Alain Strowel) summarised their results, mentioning the EASE Guidelines (<http://www.ease.org.uk/publications/author-guidelines-authors-and-translators/>), as important recommendations, which are freely available in many languages.

In order to increase public trust in science and expertise, but also to broaden interdisciplinary cooperation among researchers, raise the status of European scientists, promote research integrity and high-quality science translation and editing, after the conference, EASE suggested to Re-Imagine Europa that the following actions should be taken:

- promotion of effective and ethical scientific communication, for example by means of courses in scientific writing based on the EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators of Scientific Articles (especially for PhD students and older researchers who wish to improve their writing skills)
- promotion of editorial standards for science journals (eg COPE Guidelines, <https://publicationethics.org/resources>), as science journal editors are the “gatekeepers” who decide what gets published and what does not

- exposure and condemnation of predatory journals, which commercially publish low-quality papers without peer review or editorial judgement
- emphasis on methodological rigour and reproducibility, using editors as educators and advocates
- freedom of choice of science translators and author’s editors by scientists for their manuscripts before submission to a journal (no obligation to issue calls for bids, etc)
- freedom of editorial choice to publish good science without commercial or political influence
- reduction of the bureaucratic workload of scientists, who now waste a lot of their time on unnecessary procedures
- continuous development of critical and analytical thinking skills during the education of young people (in relation to fact checking and validity of interpretations).

We noted that EASE can be directly involved in some of these actions, for example by

- updating editorial recommendations for scientists and science translators (EASE Guidelines, in >20 languages)
- developing and endorsing standards of science editing,
- disseminating information about best practice
- advocating for greater transparency and awareness of the scientific process and publishing
- encouraging disaggregation of data by sex and/or gender (where appropriate, especially in medicine) and awareness of gender bias (SAGER Guidelines, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-016-0007-6>)
- training the trainers in scientific communication
- recommending experienced journal editors and author’s editors.

We hope that our suggestions will be taken into account in the “Roadmap for a New Model of the Digital Information Ecosystem” in Europe in the near future.

Sylwia Ufnalska

EASE Council member, Poznań, Poland

sylwia.ufnalska@gmail.com