Combating disinformation through equitable, open and accessible science

BY MARCVANHOLSBEECK · 26/08/2024

Some reflections on the OPERAS Trust On 2024 Workshop and the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU

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Marc Vanholsbeeck's speech during #TrustOn2024

According to [UNESCO](#), by 2023, 60% of the world's population, or 4.75 billion people, had used social networks to express themselves, keep informed and ask questions. They enjoy a digital agora of expression and protest, building and fostering social relationships and identities.

At the same time, an early 2023 survey of IFOP ([Institut français d'opinion publique](#)) targeted young French individuals[1]. The survey assessed how susceptible they are to scientific inaccuracies and examined the influence of their interaction with social media platforms. The results indicated a significant presence of conspiracy theory supporters and a growing inclination toward irrational beliefs and misinformation, particularly among frequent users of social media.

Regardless of our enthusiasm for the building of a democratic and human-centric Internet, it is thus obvious that social networks can easily become bubbles of isolation, cocoons of disinformation, online ecosystems that sometimes even lead to conspiracy and violence. This ambivalent nature of the Internet nurtures the unprecedented mix of opportunities and threats that we are facing today. There is hope for greater equity and inclusion in the way we share and communicate knowledge, empowering citizens to contribute to the public debates on which our democracies rely. At the same time, disinformation, misinformation and so-called "alternative facts" saturate our cognitive horizons.

Because we are well aware of the crucial role of science and accessible research-based knowledge in this new digital agora, we, at BELSPO – the federal Belgian Science Policy Office -, are glad to have supported the OPERAS workshop [Trust On 2024](). Placed under the auspices of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, this ambitious event took place at the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR) in Brussels on 26 and 27 June 2024. At this occasion, the role of science has been underlined as a major dimension of trust of the Internet. The conference provided participants with a unique opportunity to reflect on the cross-fertilizing interactions between science and Internet related infrastructure, governance, regulation and mediation. To increase trust in the digital sphere, collaboration is to be fostered between academia, members of the tech community, policymakers, civil society and youth.

#TrustOn 2024, organised by OPERAS and KBR with the support of BELSPO

Thinking back about the workshop today, a couple of months after the end of the Belgian Presidency, I realize these considerations strongly resonate with several major outcomes of the events that were organized by BELSPO and the federated entities during these six months of intense work and exchanges. Knowledge valorisation and the reinforcement of R&I in society have indeed been two of our main priorities in research policies. More specifically, two of our Presidency events directly related to the concerns of the Trust On 2024 workshop.

First, at the occasion of the Belgian EOSC (European Open Science Cloud) so-called [National Tripartite Event](link) in April, we hosted the philosopher Sabina Leonelli as a keynote speaker. She emphasised that the current focus in Open Science policies on sharing data and materials has become, to some extent, an obstacle to the promotion of truly equitable and human-centric Open Science. Leonelli therefore suggested an alternative, more process-oriented view of Open Science that seeks to establish "judicious connections among systems of practice." Probably Leonelli's provocative thoughts are an inspiration for us, in terms of openness, equity and the needed collaboration between all stakeholders within the digital agora.

Later in June, at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, BELSPO organized together with the European Commission and the Belgian federated entities an highly participative conference about the role of the social sciences, the arts and the humanities into evidence-informed policy making. One of the main outcomes of the event is that there is a need to go from "ego-systems" to "ecosystems" of scientific expertise, and to create "non-judgemental spaces" into which policy makers, researchers and citizens could discuss together topics for which scientific evidence is needed. A conference brief is currently in preparation and is intended to be openly peer reviewed by the participants to the conference themselves. It will present the different dimensions of a truly integrative EIPM (Evidence Informed Policy Making) ecosystem, based on trust, openness as well as a transparent circulation of information between all actors.

Photo taken during the #TrustOn2024 workshop

At the Belgian federal level, BELSPO is now implementing new "Science4Policy" funding programmes. We will do our best to integrate further therein the outcomes of the rich discussions and exchanges that the Presidency and the OPERAS workshop both stimulated and facilitated.

Ultimately, strengthening the access to free and reliable information, and particularly free and open access to research-based knowledge, contributes to strengthening our freedom of thought and expression. Which constitutes another cornerstone of our democracies. To put it in the words of Hannah Arendt: "Facts inform opinions, and

opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute"[2].

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[1] https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/la-mesinformation-scientifique-des-jeunes-a-lheure-des-reseaux-sociaux/

[2] Arendt, H. (1968). *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press.