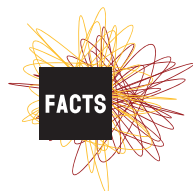


FACTS – Real Information for a Brighter Future

by Federico Castiglioni



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ABSTRACT

FACTS (From Alternative Narratives to Citizens' True EU Stories) is a project addressed to European citizens and aimed at involving them directly in the recognition of fake or biased news about the European Union. The project's chief objective is to survey public opinion, gather praise and criticism surrounding EU policies or institutions, and detect the role that fake news plays in shaping these perceptions. The Istituto Affari Internazionali hosted two FACTS roundtables, involving roughly 50 citizens of different genders and ages. According to the project guidelines, the participants were balanced between those who were politically engaged and disengaged, more and less informed, in order to achieve a selection that was as representative as possible of Italian society.

Public opinion | European Union | Italian European policy | Euroscepticism

keywords

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Introduction

The fabrication of news and misrepresentation of reality is hardly a novelty in the world political landscape. For centuries such false narratives have been termed “propaganda” and, even today, this kind of misrepresentation is a distinctive mark of many regimes. Ranks of politicians across all the continents and latitudes exploited this biased source of information to master the political discourse, often pandering to basic emotional instincts to turn the political tide in their favour. Arguably, the liberal democracy was the first system of governance in human history to restrain this abuse of power (and trust) over the public opinion. The first correctives that the liberals put in place to curb the unduly influence of governments were the separation of powers and the pluralism of sources. In this new institutional frame, many actors were allowed to spread information besides the State media. Such actors could include agency presses close to the opposition or even independent journals, and the veracity of their reports ultimately lay in the evidence they provided to support their claims. Ideally, a liberal government had to staunchly defend the independence of the media and resist the temptation to interfere. The second pillar of this liberal system – coming as a natural completion of the first – was the singular accountability of all stakeholders involved in the process. This accountability smoothed the democratic dialogue and eradicated unpalatable realities, thus narrowing the range between facts and opinions. Ordinarily, this fact checking would have been ethically rooted and would come naturally to an end when there was a clear misinterpretation of truth, but on occasion specific laws or set of rules were garrisoned to protect groups and individuals from defamation. Bound together, the two pillars of pluralism and accountability kept democracy and freedom in balance, focusing the debate more on the interpretation of reality than on its substance.

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Today, this liberal system of information is under pressure. On the one side, many governments channel their national community sentiment in directions that comply with their agenda, showing a worrying tendency towards interference. On the other side, the main actors providing information (namely social media and other online agents) are increasingly unaccountable for their actions, whether they decide to give or deny access to their platforms. It is in fact the very nature of contemporary (dis)information, almost undistinguishable from individual opinions shared with a broader community, that gives rise to most of the confusion that our societies are currently witnessing. Among the victims of this puzzling system of communication are some national institutions (e.g., the judicial power) and many supranational organisms, such as the UN and the European Union. The EU has been targeted by defamation campaigns since the economic crisis of 2008, when a number of responsibilities associated with the financial mismanagement of international funds and national budgets were ascribed to European faults. Since then, the EU has been weakened by the departure of the UK and flustered by other internal disputes, nearly resulting in a collapse of the common currency. Every attempt to invert this trend needs to retrace the origin of this political turmoil and thus face the sensitive matter of pluralism and its relationship with what is dubbed "fake news". Against this complicated picture, FACTS is a project designed to spot the source of contemporary information regarding the European Union by surveying heterogeneous groups of citizens and listening to their opinions. The originality of this project rests in its bottom-up methodology which invites policy makers to audit common citizens and refrain from easy judgements or solutions. The investigation concerns both the structure of contemporary information and its outcome and could offer a significant contribution to the ongoing debate on an overall reform of social media.

IAI roundtables

Paradoxically, the present time is an age marked by global interconnections as well as local or microlocal dynamics; in this framework the domestic debate, either national or sub-national, is widely considered by both citizens and national politicians more important than any international issue. However, this internal preference does not imply that each national bubble is secluded from the others or that there is an absence of local offshoots for global issues. Rather, what is demonstrated is a national filter sorting out international topics, understandable if we consider the different fallouts that the same problem could have on different territories.¹ FACTS moves along the lines of this public discourse, framing European topics according to a national perspective. IAI is the project's partner responsible for Italy, a country where the wind of Euroscepticism has blown strongly in the past years. The Institute organised two roundtables involving more than 50 citizens of varying age, gender and profession. The two events – each attended by

¹ Barbara Pfetsch, "Agents of Transnational Debate Across Europe. The Press in Emerging European Public Sphere", in *Javnost - The Public*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2008), p. 21-40.

25 citizens – were organised online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and used the Zoom platform. In order to ease the conversation, make the participants feel more comfortable and better manage the debate, each roundtable was divided into sub-roundtables where 5 or 6 attendees discussed a set of proposed topics. IAI appointed a trusted facilitator for every sub-roundtable. The topics submitted to the citizens concerned mainly: perceptions toward the European institutions and the process of European integration; familiarity with EU politics and the related agenda; and recognition of fake news about the EU or its policies. At the end of these mini-sessions, the facilitators gathered the participants' opinions, summarising the main points of discussion. The same questions were then repeated in the course of the plenary meeting. Each group, represented by a spokesperson, contributed to the plenary advancing the viewpoint of his/her subgroup on the submitted topics, and in so doing enriching the exchange.

Remarkably, both the roundtables, organised with different citizens and several months apart, touched on the same points and highlighted the same problems. First of all, the organisers acknowledged a significative difference in perception between younger and older people. As one of the participants underlined, the new generations were born in a socio-cultural environment "deeply influenced by the presence of Europe in their lives", and this presence was felt in many fields. From a political perspective, a visible impact of the EU is the constant mentioning of Europe-related topics in media headlines, and likewise the growing notoriety of some institutions such as the ECB or the Commission. The older citizens seemed less familiar with this recurring appearance of European names and were more inclined to feel it as an innovation (either positive or negative). Another divergence was spotted in conceptions of travel and leisure, as well as in the familiarity with other EU cultures and languages. Unsurprisingly, the younger attendees stressed the importance of the Erasmus programme and the great opportunities offered by a better knowledge of other European countries, while the over-65 group didn't share the same enthusiasm. Similarly, the political opinions expressed regarding both the EU's achievements and the Union's future seemed to mirror the age divide. In this regard, the organisers and the facilitators noticed on the one hand an insufficient proclivity among the younger participants to express strong opinions during the discussion, and on the other a better critical attitude developed by the elders. The lack of assertiveness on the part of the young participants was balanced by a stronger belief in their stance (i.e., the role of the EU in assuring peace and softening conflicts), whereas those who were more critical prefaced their statements with doubtful openings (i.e., "if" – "I wonder" – "probably"). With regard to the participants' knowledge, there was not a great difference according to age classes but rather between those who were educated and engaged and those who remained distant from politics. In addition, no difference of attitude or opinions along gender lines was observed. During the first roundtable, some participants lamented also a global disconnect for small Italian towns and their struggle to keep up with the EU debate, but the second meeting neglected to comment on this aspect.

Main findings

In the course of the two roundtables there surfaced a common belief, shared by the vast majority of the attendees, that in Italy the debate around European topics is usually swallow and often biased. The unanimous solution offered was the rolling out of a campaign of information concerning European policies, whose goal would be to educate citizens (and thus the electorate) on the complicated structure of the EU policy-making process. A better education is also, according to the participants, the key to being able to detect and therefore debunk fake news and misleading information. As for the sources of such fake news, all the attendees agreed on the role of social media in its spread, sometimes with the tacit support of TV commentators, journals or other broadcasters. In the words of a plenary panellist, the traditional media would just echo such misleading information, reflecting an inaccurate portrayal of reality. Some participants advanced the hypothesis that this disinformation is caused not just by the ignorance of many journalists, but even determined by hidden political purposes. On the flip side of this mistrust toward the official and unofficial media there is a strong perceived reliability of the official channels of communication (websites, official statements, etc.).

As was foreseeable, a major divergence of opinions was detected on hot political issues regarding migration and economic matters. Although not central in the IAI's questionnaire, these topics were naturally raised during the debate and were connected with the perception of Europe. Tellingly, the conversation on the economy was entangled with the symbols that most identify the EU project; many participants contended that it is the common currency that is the supreme symbol of integration, and only a minority stated a feeling for the EU flag. This lack of symbols was not perceived as an obstacle by the most euro-enthusiastic, whereas the Eurosceptics presented it as an example of cold bureaucratic integration. Some citizens harshly criticised the common currency, contending that its creation was devised by the commercial banks as main beneficiaries of the integration process. The debate on migration was by contrast spurred by the question of the role of the European Union in assuring peace and prosperity for its members. In this regard, all participants seemed to accept that the EU is determinant in fostering peace inside its borders, although they wondered if this accomplishment is equally successful for its neighbours and the associated countries. All of these citizens felt that the current waves of migration are somehow an EU failure and a signal of international instability, but they were deeply divided about ways to tackle the problem.

Conclusions

Even though the debate was channelled around the "fake news" issue, and therefore in line with the IAI's initial setting, it soon translated into a political exchange about the project of European integration and its future. A common consensus was found by the groups' representatives and spokespersons concerning the next

steps ahead, which should involve aspects of security and defence. Given the focus of this meeting, security was particularly emphasised, especially embracing the digital dimension. In this regard, the participants mentioned possible threats coming from Russia and China and their interest in destabilisation of the EU and/or its member states, and proposed a common European strategy to deter cyber-attacks as a solution. By contrast, different views emerged about a possible institutional change. For many participants, the EU is like an unfinished puzzle or a half-done cathedral, marvellous but incomplete. According to others, the common institutions have already assumed a clear and visible shape – connotated by binding laws and intergovernmentalism – and this configuration could well be definitive. For these participants, there is no sign that the nature of the EU will be changing in the near future, nor indications suggesting that the citizens want (or ever wanted) something different, and thus there is nothing “unfinished”. In other words, for these citizens the creation of a “European Federation” is not a natural outcome of this Union but just a path that some would advocate for.

In conclusion, the plenary roundtable raised a fundamental question, revolving around Euroscepticism and its distinctive character. Even on this issue different viewpoints were registered. Some contended that Euroscepticism as such does not exist, being a common word exploited for political ends whose significance remains foggy. A Eurosceptic person could be someone who just doesn’t agree with the Commission’s guidelines, a political party against further European integration, or whoever questions the current state of the Union. In this sense, those who oppose the existence of a European identity and those standing for a deeper integration could be equally dubbed “Eurosceptics”. Other participants strongly disagreed with this stance, affirming that the only true Euroscepticism is the one advanced by nationalist political parties and targeting the EU for any failure. These actors would defy any kind of supranational integration and thus their positions are intertwined with nationalist claims. Although controversial, this last topic excellently summarised the prolific exchange that came out of the IAI’s roundtables, closing the gap between a specialist dialogue often believed distant from common citizens and the real opinions of the latter, which often coincided more than expected with the current institutional debate.

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