

# STOA

## Panel for the Future of Science and Technology

STOA Panel Meeting  
Thursday, 14 March 2019, 09:30 – 11:00  
Room LOW N1.4, Strasbourg

### Minutes

- The meeting started at 09:42 with Eva KAILI, MEP and STOA Chair, in the chair.

#### 1. Adoption of the draft agenda (PE 624.297)

- The Chair informed Members that interpretation was available in English, French, German, and Spanish, and that the meeting was being web-streamed.
- She then announced that the draft agenda was in the dossier and proposed that the following items be added:
  - 3.1. *STOA workshop on ‘Farming without agro-chemicals - Can we grow without using herbicides, fungicides and insecticides?’ – Feedback;*
  - 3.2. *STOA Technology Assessment study on ‘Blockchain for supply chains and international trade’ – Update;* and
  - 3.3. *Proposal for a European Science-Media Hub summer school for young journalists, 4-7 June 2019, Strasbourg.*
- She finally announced that, as there were no requests for further changes or additions, the agenda was deemed adopted with these modifications.

#### 2. Approval of draft minutes – STOA Panel meeting of 14 February 2019

- The Chair announced that the draft minutes of the Panel meeting of 14 February 2019 were in the dossier and, as there were no requests for changes, they were deemed approved (as in the file).

#### 3. Ongoing and new STOA projects

- The Chair informed Members that all ongoing STOA projects were running to schedule.
- 3.1. *STOA workshop on ‘Farming without agro-chemicals - Can we grow without using herbicides, fungicides and insecticides?’ – Feedback*
  - The Chair invited Anthea McINTYRE, MEP and STOA Panel member, and who had chaired the workshop, to give her feedback on the event.
  - Ms McINTYRE noted that the workshop was well-attended, well-balanced and very interesting. She explained that the event covered a scientific perspective, viewpoints from both conventional and organic farmers, and insights into consumer perceptions. She added that the workshop was supported by a background document prepared by scientists from the University of Leuven. Ms McINTYRE highlighted the controversial character of the topic and underlined that the background document was not a STOA study. She expressed the wish for STOA to pursue a full-blown foresight study in order to map both scientific evidence and societal perspectives on Plant Protection Products and sustainable agriculture. She was confident that European Parliament (EP) Vice-President Mairead McGuinness, MEP, who had initially requested this study, shared her wish.
  - The Chair then announced that, as there were no objections, the Panel was confirming its previous decision to carry out a Scientific Foresight study on this subject.
- 3.2. *STOA Technology Assessment study on ‘Blockchain for supply chains and international trade’ – Update*
  - The Chair explained that the Committee on International Trade (INTA) had proposed this project and that the Panel had approved it on 13 September 2018. She added that a contract had been awarded to a STOA framework contractor and work would start in the same month, with completion planned for January 2020.
  - She went on to express her interest in being Lead Panel Member for this study.
  - The Chair finally announced that, as there were no objections, the work on the project would proceed as explained, with her as Lead Panel Member.

### 3.3. Proposal for a European Science-Media Hub summer school for young journalists, 4-7 June 2019, Strasbourg

- The Chair reported that the STOA Bureau was recommending the approval of the proposal, submitted by STOA First Vice-Chair Paul RÜBIG, MEP, for a European Science-Media Hub (ESMH) summer school for young journalists and students from all over the EU on current technological developments, in particular in artificial intelligence (AI). She added that the summer school would take place in the EP premises in Strasbourg.
- The Chair proposed that the ESMH budget be used to cover all costs for the summer school, including reimbursement of travel and accommodation costs of participants and speakers, catering expenses, and making use of external services for organisational support.
- The Chair then announced that, as there were no objections, the above project was approved and the ESMH budget would be used for its implementation.

### **4. STOA Annual Lecture 2019**

- The Chair informed the Panel that the STOA Bureau, in its February meeting, had expressed a preference for the topic of Innovation. The STOA Secretariat and herself had begun to contact possible speakers. She then invited Members to contact the STOA Bureau or Secretariat if they had any further suggestions.
- The Chair mentioned that the Bureau would report to the Panel on these developments in its meeting on 28 March, aiming to present for approval by the Panel a final choice of topic and speaker in the 18 April meeting.
- The Chair announced that, as there were no objections, the preparations would continue along these lines.

### **5. STOA workshops and joint activities with external organisations**

#### 5.1. Forthcoming events

- The Chair referred participants to the list of ongoing projects included in the dossier.

#### 5.2. STOA working breakfast on ‘The science and ethics of gene drive - Case study: Eradicating malaria’, 19 March 2019, EP, Brussels

- The Chair reported that the working breakfast, featuring a panel discussion, would address the preliminary scientific foresight analysis of gene drive technology as applied for the eradication of malaria.
- The Chair announced that, as there were no objections, the organisation would continue along these lines and the STOA budget would be used to finance this working breakfast.

#### 5.3. EP dialogue seminar with churches, religious and philosophical organisations on ‘Artificial Intelligence: Ethical Concerns’, 19 March 2018, EP, Brussels

- The Chair explained that the seminar was being organised by the EP in the framework of its official dialogue with religious and philosophical organisations (Article 17 TFEU). STOA’s contribution consisted of the participation of herself and Panel member Mady DELVAUX, MEP, three briefings prepared by the Secretariat and two invited experts reimbursed from the STOA budget.
- The Chair announced that, as there were no objections, STOA’s participation would continue as described.

#### 5.4. STOA-LIBE<sup>1</sup> workshop on ‘Artificial intelligence and the protection of human rights’, 20 March 2019, EP, Brussels

- The Chair reported that the programme was finalised, including a presentation of the interim findings of the STOA study on ‘Ethical guidelines for the responsible design, development, deployment and use of AI’.
- She announced that, as there were no objections, the organisation would continue along these lines.

#### 5.5. ESMH workshop on ‘Virality and influencers in digital communication’, 3 April 2019, EP, Brussels

- The Chair reported that the event would focus on the use of modern technologies by so-called ‘influencers’ and would look into how technologies can carry and amplify messages to become ‘viral’. The programme would include experts in communication technologies, the social sciences and journalism, in particular online communication specialists. The ESMH could use external expertise to prepare a report on the event.
- She then encouraged Panel members to start promoting the event in their political groups and committees.
- The Chair announced that, as there were no objections, the organisation would continue along these lines and the ESMH budget would be used for the preparation of the event.

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<sup>1</sup> EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

5.6. *STOA working breakfast on ‘Technology and innovation of human implants’, 4 April 2019, EP, Brussels*

- The Chair told that in the event, proposed by Mr RÜBIG, the status of implants in Europe – particularly orthopaedic implants – would be discussed among researchers and decision-makers.
  - The Chair announced that, as there were no objections, the event would be implemented along these lines.
- 6. Presentation of outcomes of the Technology Assessment studies on ‘Technology and social polarisation’**
- The Chair noted that the presentations would highlight the findings of two studies addressing different aspects of the relationship between technology and social polarisation. The first looked at it in the context of news production and consumption, while the second focused on political campaigns and communication.
  - The Chair welcomed and gave the floor to one of the authors of the first study, Richard FLETCHER, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, UK.
  - Mr FLETCHER pointed out that the key question of their study was whether the news media was in some way causing polarisation amongst the public in Europe.
  - He then summarised what the latest research on this question showed: (i) people across Europe did select news based on their political preferences, but this did not change most people’s attitudes, though it might strengthen views of those that already held strong views; (ii) research found little evidence of so-called ‘echo chambers’ and/or ‘filter bubbles’; and (iii) much of the knowledge in this area came from research conducted in the United States, and so we should be cautious about using it to describe developments in Europe.
  - To conclude, Mr FLETCHER listed several policy options which, he added, were quite modest, because most research failed to find strong links between news use and polarisation: (i) foster higher levels of interest in the news; (ii) improve ‘opportunity structures’ for news use; (iii) assist public service media with their online efforts; (iv) enable additional collaboration between researchers and practitioners.
  - The Chair then welcomed and gave the floor to one of the authors of the second study Nahema MARCHAL, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK.
  - Ms MARCHAL highlighted several ways in which new digital technologies could reinforce mechanisms of social and political polarisation: (i) by the rise of more emotionally charged content, which was very effective in reaching people and was exploited by a number of economic and political actors; (ii) by the rise of private messaging platforms, on which people tended to trust and send political information more readily; (iii) by the primacy of images on digital platforms, which easily drew attention.
  - Ms MARCHAL explained that advances in AI could offer new opportunities to bring about better accountability and create healthy online communities. She warned however, that pitfalls, such as the secrecy of AI tools and smart propaganda tools creating believable misinformation, should be addressed.
  - The speaker finally put forward a number of policy options: (i) promoting greater transparency and accountability; (ii) updating electoral laws to accommodate digital public life; (iii) bridging digital divides, where groups of citizens had different levels of access to digital resources.
  - The Chair then opened the floor for comments and questions.
  - Mr RÜBIG asked if there existed analytical tools to measure the dimension and development of filter bubbles.
  - Ms MARCHAL made clear that we should distinguish between filter bubbles arising because of our social context and the ones that might arise because of algorithms and technology. Regarding the first type of filter bubble, we could ourselves make efforts to diversify. Regarding the second type, there was not sufficient evidence to claim that technology in itself was sufficient to cause them.
  - Mr FLETCHER added that filter bubbles were extremely difficult to research, especially in the context of private messaging. He did however point out a recent partnership, Social Science 1, which acted as a broker between Facebook and academic researchers, stimulating research on topics like filter bubbles.
  - Danuta JAZŁOWIECKA, MEP and STOA Panel member, asked the speakers what direction one should take regarding digital law and how decisions in this context should be communicated to citizens.
  - Ms MARCHAL emphasised that, in many cases, policy-makers had to come-up with completely new legislation in order to account for the complexity of new digital systems. She advised governing bodies and law-makers to have themselves the necessary technical and social science expertise in social media and AI, and she recommended close cooperation with experts and academics. In terms of communicating to the public, she underlined the importance of holding regular plenary sessions and broadcasting.

- Algirdas SAUDARGAS, MEP, asked if society had access to details about information flows on digital platforms, which people could use, for instance, as a way to investigate filter bubbles.
- Mr FLETCHER answered that one of the reasons researchers failed to understand fully the dynamics of filter bubbles and echo chambers was that, in most cases, they lacked access to data on such information flows. There were, however, other factors making it difficult to understand these phenomena (e.g. that people used a variety of news sources next to social media. Regarding privacy and data collection by digital platforms, he believed that progress had been made and stressed the need for collaborating with platforms in addressing the issue.
- The Chair asked if the speakers might have data on the experiments regarding mood changes caused by newsfeeds showing more positive or negative content depending on the algorithms applied. She was especially interested in this topic in the context of their possible effect in elections.
- Ms MARCHAL answered that there was no reliable data on this topic. There was, however, a controversial study conducted by a researcher working for Facebook. The effects found in the study were minimal. She also referred to an opportunity mentioned in the STOA report: reducing incivility and hostility online by placing positive nudges and implementing changes on digital platforms, in cooperation with those platforms.
- The Chair furthermore asked if there was a way to track down the source of positive or negative messages meant to manipulate or mobilise people, especially with regard to regulating such attempts.
- Ms MARCHAL explained that she was not aware of a direct way in which you could identify the source of a specific forwarded message, unless people shared a link to a specific media source. This was because of the lack of information about users on many platforms, and the fact that most content was image-based.
- Mr SAUDARGAS asked if there were any studies looking specifically into the data on social media activity collected around election periods or times of important political decisions.
- Ms MARCHAL noted that the Computational Propaganda Project research group, which she was part of, had conducted some studies on this topic. Posting activity on social media tended indeed to increase, particularly from sources they classified as ‘junk news’. They also found some indications of politically motivated strategic coordination, but techniques to understand such coordination and political manipulation were not yet foolproof.
- The Chair underlined the need for more scientific data and announced that, if there were no objections, the two studies – already published on the STOA – website, would be widely distributed within and outside the EP.

## **7. Any other business**

- The Chair concluded that there were no other issues Members liked to raise or discuss.

## **8. Date and place of next meeting: Thursday, 28 March 2019, 09:30 – 11:00, Room LOW N1.4**

- The Chair announced that the next Panel meeting was scheduled for Thursday 28 March 2019, 09:30 – 11:00, in the same room (LOW N1.4).
- She added that the meeting would feature a presentation of the outcomes of the Technology Assessment study ‘*Innovative solutions for research in healthcare*’.

The meeting ended at 10:45.

## **ANNEX**

### **List of participants**

#### STOA Panel members

Ms Kaili, Mr Rübig, Mr Coelho, Ms Giménez Barbat, Ms Jazlowiecka, Ms McIntyre, Ms Schmidt.

#### Otjher Members

Mr Saudargas.

#### Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA)

Mr Karapiperis, Mr Pataki, Ms Van Woensel, Ms Tanova, Mr Boucher, Mr Plese.

#### Other participants

Ms Marence (Assistant to Ms Schmidt), Ms Izokaityte (Assistant to Mr Saudargas), Mr Ide Kostic (LIBE Secretariat), Mr Kernstock (Trainee to Ms Schmidt), Ms Valenti (Trainee to Ms Toia), Mr Carmona (DG COMM), Ms Espejo Ms Fernandez Hervas, Mr Krosidis, Ms Tournier, (DG COMM), Mr Seltz (EuroScience), Ms Jenkins.