



## OECD's Anthony Gooch on facts, fakes, the Forum, and the hope of civic tech

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# **OECD's Anthony Gooch on facts, fakes, the Forum, and the hope of civic tech**

**Intro** [00:00:06] Welcome to OECD podcast, where policy meets people. You're listening to our special World in EMotion series, highlighting the topics and speakers of the OECD Forum 2019, starting May 20th in Paris.

**Clara Young** [00:00:22] Hi, I'm Clara Young, I'm in the studio with Anthony Gooch, who's the director of OECD Public Affairs and Communications. He's also the director of OECD Forum. Now in its 20th year, the forum is OECD's annual think fest, bringing together public figures, academics, corporate leaders, and a whole host of people working to shape better policies and better lives.

**Clara Young** [00:00:46] This year's key topics? Digitalisation, international cooperation, the future of work, and what Anthony and I'll be talking about today: trust and why we need a new societal contract. So thank you for coming in to talk to me.

**Anthony Gooch** [00:1:00] Thank you very much for the invitation.

**Clara Young** [00:01:03] A question I've been asking a lot lately is this: The OECD released a report recently called Risks that Matter, which are the results of a survey of 22,000 people in 21 OECD countries, carried out last year. To me, the most startling finding is that more than half of the people feel they don't get their fair share of social benefits given the amount of taxes they pay, and that this is true even in countries that have a comparatively high level of income redistribution and social benefits. So there's a massive perception problem. What's going on with the communications there?

**Anthony Gooch** [00:01:39] I think this is human nature. We are living a time when people are indeed feeling a high degree of emotion, and that emotion is brought on by many things and by many elements, and those elements feed off each other. I would say that probably the thing that stands out most to me is that people feel and look at themselves and their position relative to that of others. And so they're not looking at things necessarily in pure, objective terms, as we're used to in organisations like the OECD. They're thinking about their lived experience—and their lived experience relative to that of other people. And so, whilst certain objective facts may point in certain directions, when people look at their lived experience—and they compare it to that of others—that's I think when they can feel unhappy, concerned, and become emotional in a in a negative sense. So it's a question of relative deprivation that can prevail and can be more important than an objective fact that you can throw at someone.

**Clara Young** [00:02:50] It's funny that you talk about lived experience, because the OECD is traditionally not so good at that kind of thing. We're an organisation of facts and figures, but not really so much emotion—which you've just been talking about. So where does this leave us as an organisation?

**Anthony Gooch** [00:03:07] I'm at the OECD because it's an organisation made up of human beings who believe in their ability—and our ability as a community and an international community—to improve people's lives. And that's deeply emotional. So I think our challenge is to be true to the reason why we were created. We were established in order to try and come up with the best ideas in public policy in order to improve people's lives in real areas—people's education, their health, their well-being. And these are elements that are of a deeply emotional nature. I think that maybe we are sometimes a little uncomfortable with that idea, particularly in the English-speaking world, because we equate emotion with losing your cool.

And it's a very different thing when you use that word in Spanish where it means happiness. So I think it's really getting in touch with what makes us human beings. And in an era of digitalisation, where we are also confronting the possibility that machines may surpass us in terms of intelligence, rational intelligence, this is a moment where your emotional intelligence should be worked on very heavily. And what makes you human should be the element you should focus on most.

**Clara Young** [00:04:30] Another emotion that we are hearing about a lot is trust, or lack of trust. And in that same study that I mentioned earlier, it was clear that people don't trust their government, and they feel that government is ignoring them. So how is this playing out politically?

**Anthony Gooch** [00:04:50] What we don't know is how much people trusted their government before. So there are a great many measures that are coming out now, barometers on trust, etc. It's really hard, actually, to know how things were at other points in time and other points in history, because we haven't been very good at measuring how people have felt and how people have perceived things. And we've also tended to measure very much on an aggregate level. The word statistic comes from the state, and now we talk about big data and data that is generated by the individual. And those are two very different worlds. In the political sphere, I think we should also be aware of the fact that there are many phenomena at work today that are not new. I remember back in the 1990s, a candidate for president of the United States called Ross Perot, who talked about the giant sucking sound of jobs to Mexico. So when you fast forward 25 years and you observe the U.S. electoral campaign in 2016, there are many parallels that you can see from different points in time, and again, how people felt about issues at certain points in time. So I think this question of trust is one that we have to manage and handle carefully. But what's clear is that we don't operate in a world where people will take things at face value. Not only that, but we also operate in a world where today, the potential for those who wish to manipulate things in a certain direction may never have been better, because the more negatively emotional environment is, the less reasonable and sanguine people are, the less they're keen to listen to points of view that may not go with them.

**Clara Young** [00:06:37] And that's exacerbated by these filter bubbles on social media. Fake news is something that we've been struggling with, and it poses a special threat to the democratic process. How do we deal with it from a communications perspective?

**Anthony Gooch** [00:06:54] So fake news as a phenomenon is indeed nothing new. It has been with us since time immemorial. You can go back to the 10th and 11th centuries, and English monarchs who you could very readily level the accusation at. The difference that we're confronting today is one of speed and amplification—and speed and amplification of things that we're having to live with as human beings pretty much in every area of our lives. But this certainly hits when you talk about information. Information is when you are forming something inside someone's head. And the ability to form things inside people's heads now has speeded up exponentially. And for that thinking to spread almost like wildfire—the word virality is used. That is something that is unprecedented. But I've become really concerned when you discover, for example, the humanity in today's day and age has the capacity to vaccinate against life-threatening diseases that at other times in the history of humankind would account for the deaths of thousands, indeed millions, and very often newborns and children. And when we're faced with situations where fake news starts to permeate life-and-death questions that are very clearly avoidable. That is a subject of very significant public policy concern, because not only is it the individual choice that someone may have, say not to vaccinate, but what does that mean in terms of the spread of diseases that can indeed literally go viral?

**Clara Young** [00:08:39] Are there policies that can inoculate people against fake news? And I'm thinking here about Finland, for instance. They believe that educating the general public about the way algorithms work basically can make them more aware of things like filter bubbles. And they're betting that people who basically understand the technology won't be as easily manipulated.

**Anthony Gooch** [00:09:00] I think that it's difficult to imagine that you can necessarily inoculate in the same way that you could, for example, against a known disease. When you enter into the realm of judgement, value judgement, opinion, at that point, if you like, the border between what is the truth and what isn't the truth is a lot more difficult to grasp. We can provide statistics and information and data in order to demonstrate, for example, that, on aggregate, migratory flows are very beneficial to most countries. Indeed, that's what the OECD does. But that doesn't take anything away from the fact that if someone is living in a particular area, region, postcode, street, they actually may be living an experience which is of a different nature, and that doesn't go together with what we have argued at another level. You've heard the expression "there are lies, damned lies, and statistics." So it doesn't make it easy for organisations like ours that are based on evidence. What it does do is certainly put a responsibility on us, for example, in terms of seeking to educate and make people aware of dangers. I think that, again, there are many, many examples where over time, society has evolved a great deal. There was a time when people didn't wear seatbelts. The idea that people would wear a seatbelt in a car was an infringement of their civil liberties. Today, no one would dream of getting in a car and not putting a seatbelt on it. There's an element I want to touch on briefly, because it's one about our nature. Human nature is what it is as well. And so we can imagine that we're all angelic creatures.

**Anthony Gooch** [00:10:51] The reality often is a little bit darker than that. An analysis was carried out by researchers who published in Science magazine a couple of years ago showing that tweets based on fake news spread six times quicker than that that was based on honest truth. And who's responsible for that? It wasn't really bots. It was us. We have a salacious side to ourselves. We have a slightly scandalous side to ourselves. And that's something that as human beings, we also have to recognise. What does that mean about us? So how do we not release ourselves against ourselves?

**Anthony Gooch** [00:11:31] That's a good question.

**Clara Young** [00:11:33] Absolutely. How about Civic Tech and is that the answer to many of these ills we've been talking about?

**Anthony Gooch** [00:11:40] So the first time I came across the term Civic Tech was back in 2015 or 2016, and it was reading an article in Le Monde, the French newspaper. And as I read through it, it spoke about the ability suddenly to increase exponentially the number of people involved in formulating public decision making, and being part of a process; an ability to be able to inform in a manner that we haven't been able to in the past; to be able to organise dialogues on an unprecedented scale, seek views on an unprecedented scale.

**Anthony Gooch** [00:12:23] And all of this resulted in an ability to harness collective intelligence. So, wow, extraordinary. Suddenly we are in front of a force for good that is something that gives you great hope.

And of course, in the face of a lot of the issues that we dwell on, a lot about lack of trust and fake news, many of which you've touched upon already, what I saw when I came across this term for the first time was undoubtedly a really strong ray of hope. It made me think, well, wow, if we can articulate this concept effectively, certainly at the OECD, if we are able to increase exponentially the number of people who were involved with us, and we're about to organise our forum, and we're going to bring many people here on the ground—but also the number of people who are going to connect virtually with us, who may listen to this podcast, who may engage with us in all sorts of ways. If we can increase that community exponentially, be able to listen to them, to what they are concerned about, to what worries them. Not assume that we know things, that we know everything, [but] to seek out their views and also involve them in potential solutions. Well, isn't that a sort of wonderful world? And it did also make me think back to an initiative that we took back in 2011 when we launched the OECD Better Life Index, where what we were after was trying to find out what was most important to people in their lives for their well-being. The reason being that the OECD was actually set up to try and improve people's well-being. And part of that starts with asking people, not assuming that you know. To listen to people is often a very difficult thing to do. And many of us are hard-wired to interpret communications as a one way process where we broadcast, where we talk. But we struggle very often to listen, to listen actively and carefully, and also to listen to the things that we may not wish to hear. It depends on how you ask a question. If you ask a question in a very closed way, you will circumscribe the type of answer that you will get if you ask questions in an open way, yes, you control less. At the same time, you may become aware of things that you were unaware of before. And I think that that's never been more important, because with every day that passes, perhaps we realise that there are many things that we haven't grappled with, we weren't aware of, and they're coming at us thick and fast now. Sometimes it's very daunting. It's certainly one of the reasons why we picked the theme this year for the forum of a World in EMotion. It's a world in great motion, there are many processes at work at the same time. Digitalisation comes on top of globalisation. It's a world of emotion, where we're feeling many emotions—positive, negative. And when those two elements come together, it does put us in a what the English would call an “interesting” position, which is a nice euphemism. It's a moment where things can go many different ways. And whatever we can do, I suppose, to try and harness the collective intelligence that civic tech may or may not be able to help us with, and to try and harness that in as positive a way as possible with positive emotions, the better.

**Clara Young** [00:15:38] Thank you, Anthony, and thank you, everybody, for listening to OECD podcast. I'm Clara Young. Join our forum virtually at [oecd-forum.org](https://oecd-forum.org).

**Outro** [00:15:52] Thank you for listening to OECD podcasts. You can learn more on this topic at the 2019 OECD Forum, World in EMotion, taking place May 20th and 21st. To listen to more OECD podcasts, you can find us on Spotify, iTunes podcast and [soundcloud.com/oecd](https://soundcloud.com/oecd).