



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF

Trust in science – The perspective of European policy makers



In the fast-changing digital environment of today, the challenges posed by disinformation and the decline of public trust have become critical. While digital platforms and artificial intelligence offer significant potential, they have also facilitated the widespread dissemination of false and misleading information like never before. This policy brief, which summarizes the main results from the TrustOn Workshop and the Science Summit during the 79th United Nations General Assembly session titled “Fostering Trust in the Digital Age” in 2024 aims to tackle these urgent concerns. Both events gathered experts to discuss strategies for combating disinformation and enhancing trust in science and digital ecosystems.

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INTRODUCTION

In today’s rapidly evolving digital landscape, the challenges of disinformation and the erosion of public trust have reached critical levels. The rise of digital platforms and artificial intelligence, while offering tremendous potential, has also enabled the proliferation of false and misleading information on an unprecedented scale. The disinformation crisis is not a standalone problem—it is a shared challenge that demands global solutions. Whether tackling climate change, public health, or social justice, we cannot succeed if disinformation persists in eroding public trust and democratic systems. As this policy brief demonstrates, addressing disinformation necessitates innovative solutions, participatory governance, a human-centered approach, and community support.

Tackling disinformation is vital for realizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Reliable and inclusive digital spaces are essential for ensuring fair access to quality education (SDG 4), advancing gender equality (SDG 5), decreasing inequalities (SDG 10), and creating peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16). Additionally, global partnerships for sustainable development (SDG 17) rely on our capacity to cultivate trust and integrity in the digital world. To address disinformation and building trust in the digital age holistically, the TrustOn Workshop in Brussels in June 2024 was organized in three distinct yet complementary tracks: (1) science, (2)

infrastructure, and (3) mediation. According to the focus on the IANUS project on trust in science, this policy brief will concentrate on the key insights of the first science track.

POLICY RESULTS

The Science track at the TrustOn 2024 event focused on mis- and disinformation in science, emphasizing the need to build trust in scientific information. It drew insights from four EU-funded Horizon Europe projects: COALESCE, IANUS, POIESIS, and VERITY. The track aimed to develop policy recommendations to combat misinformation through trust-building, structured into three sessions addressing:

1. Identifying key audiences for science communication.
2. Employing participatory methods to tackle online misinformation.
3. Promoting collaboration among stakeholders to foster trust in science, referred to as "Stewards of Trust."

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the vulnerability of science to mis- and disinformation while simultaneously raising public awareness of science's role in addressing global health issues. Trust in science is generally high, but it does not ensure compliance with scientific recommendations. Factors influencing trust include the nature of science, political and economic interplay, evolving research environments, and shifting trust dynamics.

Collaboration in Science Communication

The digital age presents challenges for science communication, particularly highlighted during the pandemic when misinformation spread rapidly. A recent panel in Lithuania revealed that while AI can enhance research, it also complicates trust due to doubts about information authenticity. Clear communication from scientists about their expertise is critical to maintaining public trust, and ethical journalism plays a vital role in bridging gaps between scientific communities and the public.

Collaborative efforts between journalists and scientists can help contextualize scientific findings, while enhancing public literacy about scientific processes is essential to reduce skepticism. Social media's influence on public perceptions necessitates tech companies and scientists working together to develop tools that help identify credible information sources.

Redefining the Trust Ecosystem

Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relies on public trust in science. The traditional trust model is evolving from "institutional trust" to a "distributed trust" model due to the digital revolution. "Stewards of Trust" from various sectors are critical in nurturing this trust through effective communication, transparency, and equitable benefit distribution. The VERITY project emphasizes the importance of collaborative relationships and transparency to ensure scientific progress aligns with public interest.

Responsible Science Communication

Trust in science is a complex state influenced by personal characteristics, societal perceptions, and previous experiences. The IANUS project identifies science communication as vital for facilitating dialogue and addressing misinformation. Systemic challenges, including sensationalism and politicization, complicate trust in scientific discourse.

Combating Scientific Disinformation

With 59% of EU individuals using social media for news, traditional media remains perceived as more trustworthy. The VERITY project's analysis during the COVID-19 vaccination period found that 25% of social media messages were from unreliable sources. Trustworthy messages generally received more engagement, but untrustworthy messages often garnered significant attention initially. Public sentiment analysis revealed younger users are more susceptible to misinformation, emphasizing the need for effective strategies to combat disinformation.

Ethical AI Use in Education and Research

The "Guidelines on the Ethical Use of AI in Science and Studies" highlight AI's transformative role and its implications for trust and disinformation. While AI can enhance efficiency, it also poses risks for spreading misinformation. Transparency in AI usage and the need for robust verification processes are essential to maintain trust and integrity in scientific outputs.

Addressing Science Hoaxes

The rise of science hoaxes, particularly during crises like COVID-19, highlights the urgency of combating misinformation. The COALESCE Project aims to rebuild trust in science through establishing a European Competence Centre for Science Communication, focusing on transparent practices that connect scientific information to the public's experiences and values.

Public Perspectives on Science Communication

The POIESIS project explores relationships between research integrity, societal integration, and public trust. It emphasizes the need for responsible research practices and public engagement to enhance trust. Studies reveal that while citizens support public involvement in research, they have concerns about laypeople's expertise and prefer traditional media for scientific information.

Changing the Communication Paradigm

The decline in trust towards institutions necessitates a reevaluation of public communication strategies. The report "Trustworthy Public Communication" emphasizes effective communication's role in promoting democracy and the need for transparency and ethical considerations in public engagement. It advocates for a shift from merely influencing public opinion to enabling informed public debate, incorporating citizen input to strengthen the relationship between institutions and communities.

In conclusion, the Science track at TrustOn 2024 underscored the critical importance of building trust in science through collaboration, ethical communication, and proactive engagement with the public to combat misinformation and foster a more informed society.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To combat mis- and disinformation in science, a comprehensive approach is essential to build trust in scientific endeavors, involving collaboration among all stakeholders within the trust ecosystem. This collaboration must occur at macro, meso, and micro levels to address the interconnected nature of science, politics, and economics, ensuring that everyone has an equal right to access and benefit from scientific advancements and their applications (Article 27(1) UDHR; Article 15(1)(b) ICESCR).

- At the **macro level**, we aim to establish Global Governance solutions to promote responsible global research and the role of policymakers, including the UN, in coordinating efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation on a global scale to ensure accountability. This includes regulating social media and industry players who significantly influence science production, funding, implementation, and communication (monetization of science). We are optimistic about the impact of EU regulations, such as the Brussels effect, and anticipate similar outcomes with the forthcoming Digital Service Act, Digital Markets Act, Code of Practice on Disinformation, and Political Advertising Act. Additionally, we need a global strategy to safeguard the freedom of science and protect researchers, particularly through research-performing organizations (RPOs) like universities.
- At the **meso level**, directed towards research funding organizations (RFOs) and research RPOs, there is a pressing need to develop guidelines for responsible science communication that clarify the roles of different stakeholders and assist citizens in assessing trustworthy communications. These organizations should also promote more accessible communication of scientific findings, including implementing reward and recognition systems, as well as providing training and resources.

- Finally, at the **micro level**, all actors involved in the trust ecosystem for science bear responsibilities. We advocate for (1) diversifying the presentation of facts and values in narratives to better represent the population's diversity; (2) implementing incentives to encourage innovative hybrid collaboration methods that actively engage diverse communities and cultural groups, aiming to establish sustainable public engagement activities; and (3) committing to evidence-based practices, critically applying methods, and enhancing science communication for various audiences.

The research findings and insights from the TrustOn2024 event highlight the collaborative essence of science and trust. Science is a collective endeavor that extends beyond scientists to encompass the entire scientific community and the public. It requires inclusive and meaningful relationships within the trust ecosystem, engaging all actors and communities involved.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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CONSORTIUM	ACUMENIST Brussels, Belgium ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI Thessaloniki, Greece ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM Rotterdam, the Netherlands FRAUNHOFER INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMS AND INNOVATION RESEARCH ISI Karlsruhe, Germany LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE London, United Kingdom Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands UNIVERSITY OF TARTU Tartu, Estonia KARLSRUHE INSTITUT OF TECHNOLOGY – KIT Karlsruhe, Germany SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME Rome, Italy RESEARCH COUNCIL OF LITHUANIA Vilnius, Lithuania
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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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FURTHER READING

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