

By leap of faith? How to regain trust in science and expertise

December 9 2019



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Fake news? Post-truth? Populism? In the current environment of growing scepticism about political institutions and a dismissal of journalism and scientific facts, public trust in expertise is seen as

eroding. Such trends are often associated with a changing digital communication landscape where new responses and mechanisms are required to find common ground in public discourse and decision-making. This is the conclusion of a series of discussion papers by ALLEA (All European Academies), the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities. ALLEA is among the five European academy networks involved with the EU-funded SAPEA project, part of the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism.

The topics covered in the discussion papers were presented at a briefing hosted by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), a member of ALLEA. Reported on by the *Irish Times*, Prof. Luke Drury from the ALLEA Working Group on Truth, Trust and Expertise highlighted some of the ways in which social media affects trustworthiness. Prof. Drury said [social media platforms](#) have to accept that they are responsible for the content they carry. "They can't pretend that they are neutral platforms when there are algorithms which deliberately push polarization and enable bubbles and echo chambers which make people susceptible to manipulation."

Context collapse

Prof. Maria Baghramian, a member of the same ALLEA Working Group, referred to the notion of context collapse in her [presentation](#) at RIA's briefing. "The digital channels for spreading knowledge often give users little clarity about who says what in which context and on the basis of what authority or expertise."

Prof. Baghramian, who is also quoted in the *Irish Times*, pointed to the characteristics attributed to trustworthy experts. "Competence, integrity/honesty, credibility and track record are all important but so too is benevolence which is when someone is disposed to act in the interests

of others and show good will towards people." She added: "The exercise of trust invokes dependence on other people. In showing trust we are exposing ourselves to the possibility of harm or hurt. We are also taking a chance and thus are open to the possibility of betrayal. There is a leap of faith in [trust](#)."

The central themes covered by the ALLEA Working Group also underline the importance of scientific knowledge and understanding, an essential dimension of policymaking. It focused on the dynamics of [public trust](#) in expertise and the contested norms of what constitutes truth, facts and evidence in scientific research and beyond. Together with the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, SAPEA provides independent scientific advice to European Commissioners to support their decision-making.

More information: For more information, please see the SAPEA project website: www.sapea.info/

Provided by CORDIS

Citation: By leap of faith? How to regain trust in science and expertise (2019, December 9) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-12-faith-regain-science-expertise.html>

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