

Meeting report: “Journalism’s Impact on Public Trust in Science”. Workshop, 2025, Berlin, DE

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The European initiative ‘Inspiring and Anchoring Trust in Science’ (IANUS) seeks to interrogate the conditions under which such trust becomes possible, legitimate, and generative. Attentive to societal apprehensions regarding scientific authority, it foregrounds inclusive and transparent modes of scientific engagement. Crucially, rather than assuming trust as an a priori good, IANUS cultivates ‘justified trust’ – acquired through critical inquiry and collaborative epistemic work. The aim is to enable the public to evaluate scientific developments carefully. What a relevant claim, especially in these times when, among other things, half-truths have been used in political election campaigns and when researchers worldwide have to defend themselves against misinterpretations of their research results.

Two days after Germany’s Bundestagswahl, an election shaped by intense media coverage and staged political narratives, the workshop took place. A collaborative endeavor conceived by IANUS researcher Dana Mahr and journalist Katja Thorwarth, bringing together around 40 participants, including journalists, scientists, and activists. The project centered on the question: How can journalism foster trust in science? In an era where misinformation proliferates across digital landscapes, threatening the credibility of scientific knowledge and the legitimacy of political decision-making and journalistic integrity, this question acquires an acute urgency. However, discussions raised another question: Is ‘trust’ the proper term to describe the relationship between science and journalism, or should it rather be a form of control – well-intentioned but constrained by epistemic authority?

Media panels

As part of IANUS, media panels were convened across Europe, including Germany, Lithuania, and Italy, to examine the dynamics of science communication and journalism. In her opening remarks to the workshop, Dana Mahr highlighted a striking pattern: While each national setting presented its particular challenges, inevitable tensions, and concerns resonated across contexts, pointing to the transnational entanglements of trust, mediation, and epistemic authority.

In the German panel, journalists stressed how misinformation spread faster than fact-based reporting, creating tensions between integrity and institutional constraints. The Italian panel concluded that economic pressures drive clickbait and speed over accuracy, fueling sensationalism. The Lithuanian panel focused on the ethical responsibilities of science journalists and debated whether AI could combat misinformation or introduce new biases. Across all three contexts, one theme stood out: Transparency is key to rebuilding trust.

Journalism = key role

Can journalism always succeed in building public trust in science by prioritizing facts over fiction? How do science journalists work, and do they have the conditions needed for thorough, reliable research?

Brian Deer revisited the notorious case of Andrew Wakefield, who falsely linked the MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella) vaccine to autism in a 1998 Lancet study (Deer, 2020). This claim fueled public anxiety, reduced immunization rates, and led to disease outbreaks. Deer’s investigation exposed Wakefield’s data falsification and concealed conflicts of interest. In 2010, the General Medical Council found Wakefield guilty of serious misconduct, leading to his disbarment, and The Lancet fully retracted the study. This case highlights the fragile interdependencies between scientific authority, commercial interests, and public trust. While this fraud severely damaged confidence in medical institutions, Deer’s work demonstrated journalism’s essential role in holding science accountable. His talk underscored that trust in science must be justified, earned, and safeguarded through ethical standards and independent oversight. As Deer emphasized, scientific integrity is a collective responsibility, requiring vigilance from researchers, journalists, and institutions. He challenged the audience to consider how journalistic integrity can help build trust in science.

The ambivalence of media

In the ensuing discussion, Katja Thorwarth and Moritz Post (University of Frankfurt and journalist for Frankfurter Rundschau and TITANIC magazine) engaged with the audience on the ‘claim to objectivity’. Post highlighted the ‘disruptive effect of echo chambers’, mainly when specific media formats frame certain topics to reinforce pre-existing biases. The conversation explored the politicization of science, a phenomenon that became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was noted how medicalizing scientific topics could contribute

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to societal polarization. The growing prominence of particular scientists in public discourse has been viewed as a double-edged sword: On the one hand, they serve as vital conduits for disseminating important information; on the other, there is a risk that media narratives may co-opt and instrumentalize them for broader ideological purposes.

A key debate questioned whether ‘trust’ best defines the relationship between journalism and science. Some argued that ‘benevolent scrutiny’ or ‘constructive control’ better captures journalism’s role – not as blind faith but as a critical and supportive examination of scientific discourse.

Silvio Duwe, an investigative reporter for ARD Kontraste, presented his findings on Tobias Ulbrich, a lawyer actively pursuing lawsuits over alleged vaccine injuries while using social media to solicit clients. Ulbrich coined the term ‘V-Aids’ to claim vaccines cause immunodeficiency and even suggested they could be ‘chemical warfare agents’. Like Moritz Post, Duwe highlighted the journalists’ challenges when deciding which experts to feature. Ensuring credibility requires thorough research and ethical responsibility, particularly concerning vaccine-related health concerns. Journalists must apply key strategies to navigate figures like Ulbrich: Rigorous fact-checking, avoiding false balance, framing claims critically rather than quoting them directly, scrutinizing financial motives, and prioritizing proactive, evidence-based reporting. Duwe’s talk reinforced the vital role of investigative journalism in upholding scientific integrity.

Challenges

Discussions highlighted growing pressures on scientists and journalists, from reputational competition to fast-paced, output-driven work. Political decision-makers demand rapid information, yet this urgency can compromise quality. In journalism, the rush to publish breaking news often limits thorough research and fact-checking, increasing the risk of inaccuracies that undermine public trust. Similarly, scientific advisors must provide timely insights under tight deadlines, sometimes at the cost of depth and alternative perspectives. Both fields must balance speed with reliability. Upholding credibility requires strategies that ensure accuracy without sacrificing depth.

Conclusion

The workshop, featuring presentations, short impulses, and a panel discussion, went beyond information exchange, fostering more profound understanding. Participants shared personal encounters with fake news, hate speech, and defamation while engaging in rigorous, fact-based debate. One participant described the interdependence of science and journalism as a ‘relationship of control’ based on mutual trust. The Bundestag election results and the AfD’s rise highlighted the urgency of legally protecting investigative journalism amid growing concerns over disinformation.

The conference also exposed tensions between the distinct logic of journalism and science, revealing how they influence – and sometimes challenge – each other. A central takeaway

Upholding credibility requires strategies that ensure accuracy without sacrificing depth.

Artificial intelligence and journalism

Eva Paraschou and Maria Michali (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) presented findings from their IANUS study, ‘AI and Journalism: A Methodology for Political Discourse Analysis’. They examined how artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance journalism by processing vast datasets, enabling faster access to relevant information.

Analyzing 171 campaign speeches by Greek politicians in 2023, they used AI to identify key topics, assess emotional undertones, and detect populist or polarizing statements. AI-generated annotations, based on prompts for criticism, topic categorization, populism, and sentiment analysis, were reviewed by journalists acting as humans in the loop. Researchers then compared AI outputs with human-refined annotations to assess the level of intervention needed. The study also explored public trust in AI-assisted journalism. When informed of human oversight, trust significantly increased – 90% of users valued the transparency of results, while 75% found the model competent for analysis. These findings underscore the critical role of journalistic oversight in AI-driven research.

emerged: Collaboration between both fields is essential to ensuring the public remains informed, critically engaged, and resilient against misinformation. Therefore, the workshop was also very beneficial for technology assessment, whose inter- and transdisciplinary research methods and claims to generate knowledge for decision-making processes are essentially based on transparent knowledge production, reflection, and normative foundation.

References

Deer, Brian (2020): The doctor who fooled the world. Science, deception, and the war on vaccines. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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