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REVIEW

# Review of the European Commission Joint Research Centre report on trustworthy public communication

**Reviewed Book**

Smillie, L. and Scharfbillig, M. (2024).
*Trustworthy public communication: how public communicators can strengthen our democracies*.
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**Reviewed by**

## Byron Hyde

**Abstract**

The Joint Research Centre's recent report offers communicators ten actionable recommendations organised around a "trustworthiness-first" principle: that communicators should build trust by being trustworthy rather than by deploying trust-building as a strategic technique. The report draws on behavioural science, values-based audience segmentation, and original empirical research, and takes a firm stand against manipulation. Its central weakness is that trustworthiness and trust have a weaker empirical relationship than the report acknowledges: being trustworthy does not reliably produce trust, and can sometimes paradoxically decrease trust [Hyde, 2025; Hyde, 2026a].

**Keywords**

Public understanding of science and technology; Science communication: theory and models; Policy-making, communication and governance of science

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Public trust in institutions has been declining for decades [Valgarðsson et al., 2025] but, since the pandemic in particular, public communicators are now facing an information environment hostile to the kind of informed public deliberation democracy requires. What should they do to restore trust in institutions? Researchers from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre take this question seriously in the fourth instalment of the Enlightenment 2.0 research programme. The result is an ambitious synthesis of behavioural science, communication science, democratic theory, and original empirical research structured around ten actionable recommendations for public communicators.

The report's most original contribution is its approach to audience segmentation. Rather than endorsing individualised data-profile targeting, which risks undermining shared democratic knowledge and increasing polarisation, the Joint Research Centre recommends values-based segmentation, drawing on the cross-cultural theory of basic human values [Schwartz et al., 2012] and new survey research mapping five values-and-identity profiles across EU member states. The finding that messages framed around multiple values can reach ideologically diverse audiences offers a principled middle path between one-size-fits-all messaging and personalised micro-targeting.

This is also where the report's wariness about politicised communication becomes most consequential. Recent research documents how scientific institutions' alignment with progressive democratic values has produced a crisis of conservative trust [Gauchat, 2012; Hyde, 2026b, 2026c]: in particular, the endorsement of Joe Biden by Nature [2020] was followed by a measurable and politically polarised collapse of trust in the journal and in science more broadly [Zhang, 2023], which is a result that's been replicated more generally [Syropoulos et al., 2026]. It's only just recently that evidence has emerged that political communication decreases trust in institutions, even among political allies [Clark et al., 2024]. The Joint Research Centre's preference for messaging that resonates across values profiles, rather than being tailored to specific ideological segments, looks prescient in this context.

The report also presents original experimental work on prebunking — an application of inoculation theory [Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019]. The Joint Research Centre tested both prebunking and debunking against climate and COVID-19 misinformation across four EU countries and found both effective [see also Bruns et al., 2024]. More recent systematic reviews of prebunking confirm the Joint Research Centre's empirical work: it does appear to inoculate the public against misinformation [La Selva et al., 2026]. Throughout the report, findings from 17 focus groups across nine EU member states function as an empirical check on the scientific literature and a reminder that citizens have clear views about how they wish to be treated.

The report's organising thesis is that public communicators should build trust by being trustworthy rather than by deploying trust-building as a strategic technique. This is known as a "trustworthiness-first" approach to trust [Lalumera, 2024]. This means declaring communication goals in advance and matching methods to them: there is, the report insists, a morally significant difference between helping citizens make informed decisions, changing their beliefs, and changing their behaviour; the ethical constraints on communicators increase in that order. Where behaviour change is the goal, the report prefers "boosts" and "nudge plus" approaches that build citizens' decision-making capacity over conventional nudges, which it criticises for targeting automatic rather than reflective cognition. Alongside this spectrum runs a consistent rejection of the "deficit model" — the assumption that public

scepticism reflects ignorance rather than legitimate values disagreement [Sturgis & Allum, 2004] — and a corresponding insistence on layered, multi-format communication that acknowledges uncertainty, emotions, and the limits of evidence.

This trustworthiness-first logic is appealing, but it faces a persistent empirical obstacle: trust and trustworthiness have a surprisingly weak relationship in practice, and measures intended to improve the latter frequently fail to shift the former. For example, transparency — which makes science more trustworthy — can often decrease trust in science [Hyde, 2025]: conflict of interest disclosure in the United States decreased trust in paid and unpaid physicians alike [Kanter et al., 2019]; the United Kingdom's world-leading transparency about animal research has consistently backfired [Black, 2002]; and Climategate showed that the public can lose trust in trustworthy science when they're exposed to its messy realities.

The concept of "warranted trust" is used by philosophers of science to denote trust that's aligned with trustworthiness [Intemann, 2024], but this is an ideal notion that isn't achieved very often. The Joint Research Centre implicitly acknowledges a difference between trust and warranted trust, writing that "trust can be falsely built or maintained through deceptive practices and propaganda, showing that trusting is not always indicative of trustworthiness. Conversely, lack of trust does not necessarily indicate unethical conduct" [p. 17]. But this is more a caveat than a proper reckoning with the complicated relationship between trust and trustworthiness. The report's dominant logic remains the optimistic assumption that trustworthy behaviour translates reliably into public trust — which is unsettled by the empirical evidence [Hyde, 2026a].

Where the report is on firmer ground is in its stand against manipulation. Rather than treating "well-leading" — structuring information to guide audiences toward preferred conclusions — as a permissible communicative tool [John, 2018], the Joint Research Centre insists that the communicator's goal must be stated openly. It sits comfortably with work on the ethics of public communication that criticises public health communication for routinely falling short of honesty norms through magnitude neglect, harm omission, and selective framing, and that subsequently calls for more honesty and transparency [de Barra & Brown, 2023].

The Joint Research Centre's report is a serious effort to give government communicators evidence-based guidance grounded in a consistent normative framework. Its insistence that communication goals be declared and matched to appropriate methods is more coherent than most comparable policy documents manage, and the values-segmentation work is an important and timely contribution to this literature. The chief difficulty is that the gap between trustworthiness and trust isn't really confronted, which risks making some of their recommendations appear naïve.

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