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LETTER

Systemic reform and public reception: connecting identity, trust, and emotion in changing political winds

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Abstract

The JCOM commentary set “Science communication in changing political winds” [Medvecky & Leßmöllmann, 2026] diagnoses the current crisis at a systemic level: platforms, institutions, democratic participation, power, and communicative goals. Using the Identity-Trust-Emotion framework [Uddin, 2026], I extend this systemic account by examining how audience-level processes may shape responses to competing claims and empowerment-oriented science communication. I apply the framework to Leßmöllmann and Medvecky’s account of strategic competition for epistemic authority and Toomey and Elliott’s proposal for scientific empowerment, showing how identity, trust, and emotion may help explain how systemic conditions become consequential for publics.

Keywords

Public understanding of science and technology; Public perception of science and technology; Science communication in the developing world

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The commentary set “Science communication in changing political winds” [Medvecky & Leßmöllmann, 2026] diagnoses a crisis at the level of systems: platform infrastructures can amplify problematic forms of communication, governments can fail to communicate effectively during crises, and the field debates whether persuasion or empowerment should guide practice. These are the right places to look. But systemic reforms ultimately become consequential through the ways publics encounter, interpret, and respond to scientific claims. Publics encounter these claims through identity commitments, relationships of trust, and emotional responses that may shape how systemic interventions work in practice.

Leßmöllmann and Medvecky [2026] frame the crisis as a struggle over epistemic authority and strategic interaction. In an increasingly competitive communication environment, they argue, science communicators must attend not only to their audiences but also to the other actors competing for those audiences’ attention and shaping the rules of the communicative game. This is a useful diagnosis. It raises a complementary question at the level of public reception: when publics encounter competing claims from actors operating within this strategic environment, what shapes which authorities they trust, defer to, or act upon? Consider, for example, a situation in which a scientific institution and a politically influential community figure offer conflicting interpretations of the same health risk. The difference in their institutional expertise may not by itself determine which message receives greater weight: perceptions of who represents the community, the trust attached to each source, and the emotional meaning of the issue may all shape how the competing claims are received. Within the Identity-Trust-Emotion framework [Uddin, 2026], these processes can be understood as interconnected influences on how publics evaluate competing authorities and respond to their claims. The framework therefore complements their strategic account by bringing into view the audience-level processes through which competition among communicators may become consequential. Where Leßmöllmann and Medvecky ask who is competing for a public’s attention, this framework asks how one competitor’s claim, rather than another’s, may come to shape what that public believes and does.

Toomey and Elliott [2026] propose a different systemic shift: moving science communication from persuasion toward scientific empowerment, which emphasizes people’s ability and agency to use science through skills, knowledge, opportunities, experiences, and resources. Their model already recognizes material, social-psychological, and civic dimensions, including science identity, proximity to science, agency, and the need to address distrust in biomedical institutions. This makes their proposal especially compatible with an audience-level account of identity and trust. The ITE framework can extend this insight by asking how identity, trust, and emotion might interact during encounters with particular messages, sources, or opportunities for participation. A community offered scientific empowerment by an institution it does not trust, for example, might possess the material resources for participation without experiencing those resources as empowering. Emotional responses may also influence whether participation is experienced as empowering, threatening, burdensome, or meaningful. Identity, trust, and emotion may therefore help explain when empowerment is experienced, taken up, and enacted rather than merely made available.

Read together, Leßmöllmann and Medvecky and Toomey and Elliott approach the problem from different directions. One asks how science communicators should navigate a competitive environment in which multiple actors vie for public attention and epistemic authority; the other asks how publics can be equipped to engage with science as agents

rather than merely recipients of expert advice. The ITE framework connects these systemic and normative questions to the process of public reception. It suggests that the effects of competing communicators and empowerment-oriented interventions may be shaped partly by how identity, trust, and emotion influence responses to sources, claims, and opportunities for participation. This does not imply that audience-level processes replace systemic analysis; rather, they provide a mechanism through which systemic arrangements may translate into different patterns of reception and action. Systemic reform sets the conditions under which science communication occurs; public reception helps determine how those reforms work in practice.

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