

An antidote to fear-based politics?

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Europe's new leaders must tackle disinformation, argues EuropaBio's Beat Späth



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'Disinformation undermines the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions' states the EU's recent action plan against disinformation.

Trust has also eroded in science, companies, innovation and new technologies. But is this a vicious circle? If so, then how can we break it?

Worrying about the wrong issues

Many of us are afraid of flying, but are happy to drive, although the risk of dying in a plane crash is dwarfed by the risk of dying in a car crash.

Similarly, many people seem to worry about food safety, despite the fact that food in the EU is safer than ever.

We often worry about the wrong issues, which leads us to make misguided decisions and waste resources which could be more wisely spent on solving real problems.

But where do these misguided fears come from? Throughout human evolution, it paid to run away rather than pausing to figure out if the potential danger is in fact a real one.

But our powerful instincts around fear are also being skilfully misused.

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Vaccines vs GMOs

Fear makes for attention-grabbing headlines and powerful campaigns - and distorts our perception of the world.

Most political decision-makers play along with fear-based campaigns, because some think that appeasement can build trust, while some are simply afraid of being attacked by an outraged 'public'.

But helping reinforce disinformation will not help build trust.

Take vaccinations, which save millions of lives each year: The proportion of people against vaccinations is by far the highest in France.

To build trust, should the government end all vaccination programmes, or even ban vaccinations altogether? What an absurd thought, you might say, of course not. In fact, the French government has done the opposite.

But when it comes to genetically modified (GM) crops, the French government has banned them, largely due to 'public perception'.

This scientific consensus that GM crops are as safe as conventionally bred crops has long been supported by the French Academy of Sciences, along with over [280 scientific institutions worldwide](#) [6].

And even on vaccines, the Italian government appears to be making concessions to the anti-vaxxers.

“We often worry about the wrong issues, which leads us to make misguided decisions and waste resources which could be more wisely spent”

Nothing behind the smoke screen

Standing up against fear-based campaigns may appear like a lot of effort and risk with no political gain.

But actually, it's easier when you know that fear-based campaigns are often built on a basis of fake perception.

We are often led to believe that there are masses of angry citizens who are deeply concerned about particular issues.

Except that this is very often simply not the case.

Some extreme campaigning organisations do not even have real people as members but some are financed by obscure foundations and trusts.

Haven't we all heard the old claim that “90 percent of Europeans are against genetically modified crops”? Granted, GMOs are not very popular. But 90 percent is nothing but an artificially created fake perception.

In fact, concern about GM crops has more than halved in the last nine years, from 66 percent to 27 percent according to a recent [Eurobarometer survey](#) [7]. Concern about Genome Editing was the lowest of all 15 topics covered in the survey.

On 4 July 2019, a group of young academics has successfully registered a [citizens' initiative](#) [8] with the EU Commission to ask for a revision of the rules concerning new techniques such as genome editing.

Let's hope that a pro-science initiative gets a million signatures for a change.

“The challenge of disinformation is too big a risk to ignore, and unfortunately, there is no simple antidote. But Europe's new leaders can and should make tackling it a priority for both their future and ours”

Stepping off the treadmill of fear and misinformation

Here are two practical tips for politicians who are confronted with fear-based campaigns. First, check what real scientific institutions, such as [academies of science](#) [9], say about the issue.

Second, check if it is about a real concern, rather than a campaign orchestrated by a few people.

If you want to jump off the treadmill, the most important question to ask is: How can we (re-) build trust.

There are at least two ways: First, by speaking up for facts and against misinformation This should be done not just by individual decision-makers, but by the relevant institutions.

In the area of food, the forthcoming 'general plan for risk communication' should be prioritised and connected with the EU's action plan on disinformation.

Second, by combating the spread and sources of misinformation, especially if they receive taxpayer funding.

There should be transparency when taxpayers' money is being redirected to fund campaign organisations, and a system to ensure that no taxpayers' money is used to generate disinformation.

The challenge of disinformation is too big a risk to ignore, and unfortunately, there is no simple antidote.

But Europe's new leaders can and should make tackling it a priority for both their future and ours.

About the author



Beat Späth joined EuropaBio, the European association of biotechnology industries, in 2011, and has been director for agricultural biotechnology since 2014.

Beat is a German and Swiss citizen who studied politics and languages in the UK, France and Belgium.

His previous positions were also Brussels-based, as an assistant to a Member of the European Parliament (from 2001), and with the German Retail Federation's Brussels office (from 2004).

As director for agricultural biotechnology, Beat works with a small team and member companies on all aspects of plant biotechnology, with a focus on GMO imports into the EU. [EuropaBio's new manifesto is available here](#) [10].

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