

ALLEA (2018, 2019) 'Truth, Trust and Expertise'

At the Royal Irish Academy, we champion research and promote awareness of how science enriches our lives and benefits society. As we believe that good research needs to be promoted, sustained and communicated, we bring academia, government and industry together to address issues of mutual interest, and in doing so, we contribute to public debate and policy formation.

As a Member of ALLEA, the Royal Irish Academy welcomes the recent publications from the ALLEA Working Group on Truth, Trust and Expertise. ALLEA is the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities, representing more than 50 academies from over 40 countries in Europe. Since its foundation in 1994, ALLEA represents its Member Academies on the European stage and seeks to promote science as a global public good.

Public trust in evidence-based social institutions is a central pillar of a democracy but a dismissal of journalism and scientific facts in recent years, as well as a stronger scepticism in political institutions are apparently growing across Europe. This concerning trend has been frequently related to, inter alia, a changing digital communication landscape. The impact of digitalisation may require new responses and mechanisms to sustain common ground and common sense in our public discourse.

At the core of European academies' priorities is the promotion of the values of science and research, as well as the benefits of including scientific reasoning in public discourse. To comprehend the challenges ahead in a wider context of major social, political and cultural transformations, ALLEA seeks to provide a transnational platform for perspectives on the nature of and relationship between truth, trust and expertise in the field of science.

ALLEA and its Member Academies have developed a series of publications, workshops and conferences to reflect and build upon the available expertise and to find new responses to uphold the principles and values of science in times of contested expertise. Officially presented at the 2017 ALLEA General Assembly in Budapest, the ALLEA Working Group on Truth, Trust and Expertise is a wonderful example of collaboration between ALLEA and its member academies. Co-chaired by Onora O'Neill from the British Academy and former ALLEA Vice President Ed Noort from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, it successfully brought together distinguished scholars from various fields and academies across Europe to discuss very timely and relevant issues around the alleged loss of trust in science and expertise. Central themes include:

- the alleged loss of trust in science and evidence,
- how valid knowledge can and should be acquired and communicated,
- the challenges posed by an increasingly digital society, and
- how academic disciplines and institutions should be dealing with these challenges.

This Briefing Paper by Prof Maria Baghramian MRIA and Prof Luke Drury MRIA discusses their recent work with ALLEA and introduces their new three-year Horizon2020 project.



The Authors

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Maria Baghramian is a Professor in the School of Philosophy at University College Dublin (UCD). She graduated from Queen's University Belfast in Philosophy and Social Anthropology (1983) with a Double First and received a PhD from Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in Philosophy of Logic under the supervision of Timothy Williamson (1990). She has taught in TCD (1986-1990) and in UCD and since 1990, where she was Head of UCD School of Philosophy (2011–2013 and 2017-2019). Professor Baghramian has held visiting posts in Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Institut Jean Nicod, École normale supérieure, Paris and various universities in China. She was a Fulbright scholar in Harvard in 2014. She was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2010 and is a member of the Royal Irish Academy Council (2015-2019).



Professor Luke Drury MRIA, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

Luke Drury graduated from Trinity College Dublin in pure mathematics and experimental physics in 1975 and went on to study astrophysics at the Institute of Astronomy, Cambridge, UK obtaining his PhD in 1979 under the supervision of Dr John M. Stewart. He then worked in the Max-Planck-Institut für Kernphysik in Heidelberg with Prof H. J. Voelk before returning to Ireland as Senior Professor in the then Cosmic Ray Section in 1986. He was President of the Royal Irish Academy from 2011 to 2014 and currently represents the Academy on the ALLEA Board.



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Truth, Trust and Expertise

The Working Group on “Trust, Truth and Expertise” was a joint initiative of the British Academy and ALLEA co-chaired by Onora O’Neill and Ed Noort. The group was established to explore the complexities surrounding questions of the alleged loss of trust in experts, the epistemic status of scientific knowledge, how policy formation should proceed when faced with publicly contested evidence, and more generally the role of social media and communication platforms. The group met on a number of occasions and produced three discussion papers, all available on the Royal Irish Academy website. The group benefited greatly from earlier work carried out in the interdisciplinary project “When experts disagree” funded by the Irish Research Council and co-led by Maria Baghramian (University College Dublin) and Luke Drury (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies). The work will be carried forward in a new three-year Horizon 2020 project PERiTIA - Policy, Expertise and Trust in Action - coordinated by Professor Baghramian from UCD, with ALLEA and the members of the Truth, Trust and Expertise Working Group as key partners.

“Loss of Trust? Loss of Trustworthiness? Truth and Expertise today”, the first ALLEA discussion paper in this series, examined the broader picture of whether there is actually a breakdown in trust (the evidence is mixed), the relationship between trust and trustworthiness, and the importance of emotional and affective issues in the trust relationship. One reaction to the lack of trust has been an increased and intrusive regulation and oversight of research; while greater accountability and enforcement of research integrity is desirable, the effectiveness of these measures is unclear and they may produce unintended consequences such as a demoralisation of researchers and a devaluing of creativity in favour of an instrumental view of research. The information overload, lack of filtering, and danger of self-reinforcing bubbles resulting from the explosion of social media, as well as the erosion of traditional publishing values play into this crisis of trust and expertise with worrying implications for policy formation.

The second publication in the series entitled “Trust within Science: Dynamics and Norms of Knowledge Production” focused on the changing nature of the research enterprise and the need for adherence to generally recognised ethical norms. Science, understood as “Wissenschaft” to include the social sciences and the humanities, is a global enterprise which is only possible because we are prepared to trust the work of our colleagues; no one person can gather and check the entire evidence base of even a specialist field so we must rely on others. But this trust is only possible because we have markers of trustworthiness (peer review, institutional affiliations, academic titles and honours etc) which need to be protected by ethical standards. Nor is this blind trust; we need to maintain a sceptical attitude even, and in fact particularly, with regard to our own research. While science and scholarship are the best means we have for generating trustworthy knowledge, we cannot ignore that there have been failures in the past and constant vigilance is needed. These considerations acquire a new salience in a world where modes of scientific communication are rapidly changing (open science, open access), the research assessment culture is manifestly unfit for purpose, and career progression for early stage researchers is increasingly precarious.

The third ALLEA paper that analyses the trust-relations between science and society, “Trust in Science and Changing Landscapes of Communication”, explored in more detail the consequences of the radical transformation of the communication landscape resulting from the proliferation of digital

media and platforms. Among the undesirable consequences of this development have been the deliberate polarisation of discourse, manipulation by malicious actors (fake news spread by bot farms for example), a corporatisation of communication and a decline in serious science journalism. The paper ends on the rather pessimistic but striking metaphor, that against these powerful forces, unless there is strong political and legal support, the academic community is bringing origami flowers to a machine-gun fight.

The findings of the “When Experts Disagree” project and the ALLEA Working Group on “Truth, Trust and Expertise” became the basis of PErITia. This highly interdisciplinary three-year project specifically aims to gain a better understanding of the nature and conditions of trust in the public domain and to discover indicators which can be used in measuring and establishing the trustworthiness of those involved in social and political decision making. The current turbulent social and political conditions in Western democracies, and in particular the rise of populist politics with its anti-elitist mantra, have thrown into relief the precarity of trust. The rapid changes in methods of communication have further highlighted the need to reassess and understand the requirements of trustworthiness. Sadly, Ireland is not immune from such trends. We can see the corrosive effect of social media polarisation and manipulation on the news almost daily and the tendency to dismiss expert advice finds its most extreme examples in the growth of anti-vaccination groups, opposition to fluoridation, and health concerns about mobile phone usage and 5G networks. Thus, this work, while of universal applicability, is also highly relevant to Ireland.

About ALLEA

ALLEA (All European Academies) is the European federation of academies of sciences and humanities. It was founded in 1994 and currently brings together almost 60 academies from more than 40 countries in the Council of Europe region. Its Member Academies are self-governing communities of leading scholars and researchers across all scientific fields. Independent from political, commercial and ideological interests, ALLEA contributes to the improvement of framework conditions under which science and scholarship excel. Together with its Member Academies, ALLEA addresses the full range of structural and policy issues facing Europe in science, research and innovation. Via its interdisciplinary and international working groups, various public engagement activities, and by participating in pan-European projects, ALLEA informs European policy and society through evidence-based advice.

Further information

The Royal Irish Academy/Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann is Ireland’s leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences. The Academy champions research and identifies and recognises Ireland’s world class researchers. It supports scholarship and promotes awareness of how science and the humanities enrich our lives and benefit society. Membership of the Academy is by election and is considered the highest Academic honour in Ireland.

For further information on this paper please contact policy@ria.ie