

Trusting scientist, mistrusting science

Communicating discovery
in the age of AI

Executive summary

Science has never moved faster. Artificial intelligence is accelerating discovery and changing how evidence is produced, shared and understood.

At the same time, misinformation and polarisation are making it harder for scientific insight to reach the people who need it. This paper, prepared in the context of the Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipation Summit, examines what this means for the organisations that produce and communicate scientific knowledge.

Trust in scientists holds

The familiar story of a collapse in trust does not match the evidence. Across 68 countries, trust in scientists remains moderately high and national surveys in the United States and the European Union point the same way. Confidence is uneven, however. People see scientists as competent more readily than they see them as honest or open to other views.

Confidence in information about science is weakening

The sharper shift concerns the information that reaches the public. In the United Kingdom, only 40% of people feel confident that what they hear about science is generally true and on average only 40% of Europeans trust the news. Political polarisation has risen markedly in Western Europe over the past decade and people more often doubt accurate information than accept false claims.



AI is accelerating both trends

AI is becoming a routine intermediary between science and the public and it frequently misattributes or distorts its sources. It is also contaminating the scientific record itself, with fabricated references now found in one PubMed-indexed paper in 277. Our analysis of media and social media shows these themes growing fast. Over the past year, attention to AI in scientific discovery rose by 90%, to AI as a source of health and science advice by 190% and to AI-fabricated citations and studies by 506%. Breakthrough claims face the sharpest scrutiny and the voices that shape their reception are often not those of the researchers who made them.

What organisations should do next

Credibility is increasingly won or lost in how discovery is told, by whom and through which intermediaries. The paper sets out four steps for scientific organisations, universities and NGOs, from defining where their credibility is at stake to building an organisation that remains visible and attributable when its knowledge is used and describes how Leidar supports each of them.



1. Trust in science: what we know

This section sets out what current research tells us about trust in science, scientific credibility, polarisation, misinformation and artificial intelligence. Confidence in scientists holds in most countries. What is shifting is confidence in the information people receive about science and in the routes through which that information reaches them.



Trust in science: *Beyond the crisis narrative*

Trust in science is differentiated and context-dependent.

Our desk research tells a more nuanced story than the familiar narrative of a public losing faith in science.²² Across 68 countries, international research involving more than 71,000 respondents shows that trust in scientists remains moderately high overall.^{4,16} National surveys point the same way, with 77% of Americans expressing confidence in scientists in January 2026²³ and 83% of EU citizens viewing the influence of science as positive.¹⁰

Yet beneath this broad confidence lies a more complex picture. People may recognise scientists as highly competent while being less convinced of their independence, integrity, openness or commitment to society's interests. In the 68-country study, 78% of respondents described scientists as qualified, while 57% described them as honest and 42% believed they pay attention to the views of others.⁴

The sharper shift concerns information about science. In the United Kingdom, only 40% of people feel confident that what they hear about science is generally true, down from 50% in 2019.¹² The same gap appears for the channels through which science travels. On average, only 40% of Europeans trust the news in general.⁸

Trust is also shaped by the environment in which science is communicated. National and cultural differences matter, as do political identities and perceptions of scientists' values and affiliations.

Confidence in scientific expertise does not necessarily translate into acceptance of every scientific finding, recommendation or emerging technology.



Credibility: *The value of uncertainty*



Scientific credibility depends as much on how uncertainty, openness and integrity are conveyed as on what is communicated.

Scientific credibility has traditionally been associated with expertise, evidence and authoritative conclusions. Yet research suggests that projecting certainty is not necessarily the most effective way to sustain public confidence.²⁷ Science evolves: new findings challenge established assumptions, recommendations change and breakthroughs raise questions that cannot always be answered immediately.

This creates a communication dilemma. Audiences often expect clear and definitive answers, while scientific progress depends on questioning, testing and revising existing knowledge. Attempts to conceal this uncertainty may provide reassurance in the short term but risk undermining credibility when evidence subsequently changes.

Recent research offers an important counterpoint. Transparency about the limitations of current knowledge can help protect confidence when findings are revised.^{6,27}

Audiences often expect clear and definitive answers, while scientific progress depends on questioning, testing and revising existing knowledge.



Polarisation: *When science becomes a question of identity*



Political identities, existing beliefs and perceptions of scientists' values shape how scientific evidence is judged and how scientific authority is viewed and contested.

Science does not operate in a political or societal vacuum. As scientific findings increasingly inform decisions about climate change, public health or emerging technologies, they can become entangled with broader debates about values, identity and political affiliation.

Research suggests that trust in scientists depends on how their political orientation is perceived, alongside their expertise.² When scientists are associated with a particular political position, audiences may judge their credibility through the lens of their own beliefs and affiliations. Scientific findings can consequently become part of a wider debate about who is trusted, whose interests are being served and which institutions are considered legitimate. In the United States, confidence in scientists stands at 90% among Democrats and 65% among Republicans.²³

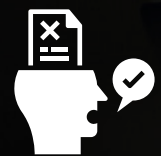
In Western Europe, data compiled by the European Broadcasting Union from the V-Dem project show a 61% increase in political polarisation between 2014 and 2024.⁷

Not every scientific issue is polarised to the same degree, and scientific evidence itself carries no party affiliation. The communication challenge is that the distinction between the scientific substance of an issue and the political or social meanings attached to it can become blurred. In such circumstances, providing more evidence alone may not resolve disagreement, particularly when the credibility of the messenger is itself being questioned.

Public expectations add a further layer. In the 68-country study, 83% of respondents want scientists to communicate with the public and 52% want them more involved in policymaking.⁴ What shapes credibility is how that engagement is perceived.

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Misinformation: *The challenge of trusting what is true*

Preserving confidence in reliable evidence has become as important as countering false information.

Misinformation presents a challenge that extends beyond the circulation of false or misleading claims. In an increasingly fragmented information environment, audiences must navigate competing narratives, conflicting sources and constant public debate about what constitutes credible information. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2026 ranks mis- and disinformation as the second most severe global risk over the next two years.³⁰

Recent research highlights a less obvious dimension of the problem. A meta-analysis of 67 studies found that people distinguish true from false news reasonably well and that their more frequent error is to doubt accurate information.²⁴ Persistent exposure to debates about misinformation can further complicate perceptions of credibility, potentially undermining confidence in the institutions and experts responsible for producing reliable knowledge.¹¹

Exposure to more information can coexist with weaker judgement. Across 16 countries, people who believe divisive health claims consume considerably more health information than others.

The implications for science are significant. Scientific findings can become entangled in wider narratives about institutional motives, political agendas and competing claims to authority. Simply correcting inaccurate statements may therefore be insufficient, particularly when audiences simultaneously question the credibility of the sources providing those corrections.¹⁹

At the same time, research suggests that the information environment can also support trust.

Exposure to credible news sources through digital platforms can improve knowledge and the ability to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information.¹



AI: *A new intermediary of scientific knowledge*

AI is reshaping both the communication of science and the way scientific authority is recognised and evaluated.

Science does not operate in a political vacuum. Generative AI is rapidly changing how people access, interpret and engage with scientific information. Alongside scientists, research institutions and traditional media, audiences can increasingly turn to conversational AI for immediate explanations, personalised responses and summaries of complex findings. This introduces a new intermediary between scientific knowledge and the public.

The shift is already measurable. In six countries surveyed by the Reuters Institute in 2025, 24% of people used generative AI

each week to look for information and only a third regularly click through to the sources behind AI-generated search answers.²⁵

The implications for trust are far from straightforward. AI can generate misleading information, obscure the origins of scientific claims and create uncertainty about who is responsible for their accuracy. Yet emerging research also demonstrates its potential to challenge entrenched misconceptions.

Independent tests found serious sourcing problems in 31% of AI assistant answers⁹ and misattributed sources in more than 60% of AI search results.¹⁴

The problem also reaches science itself. Fabricated references appeared in one PubMed-indexed paper in 277 in early 2026, against one in 2,828 in 2023.^{18,29}

Alongside scientists, research institutions and traditional media, audiences can increasingly turn to conversational AI for immediate explanations, personalised responses and summaries of complex findings.

Experiments with personalised, evidence-based AI dialogues have shown that conversational systems can reduce belief in conspiracy theories⁵, suggesting that AI may become a valuable instrument for addressing misinformation.

At the same time, the credibility of AI-mediated communication remains contested. Research indicates that audiences do not automatically trust AI-generated scientific content²⁶, while the disclosure of AI involvement and the presentation of virtual communicators can influence how information is perceived.³ In the European Union, 38% of citizens say they trust scientific research and discoveries produced with the help of AI, while 25% distrust them.¹⁰

A further question concerns attribution. AI makes scientific knowledge easier to use while making the researchers and institutions behind it less visible and close to half of news coverage of large language models presents AI itself as the active agent.²¹

What this means for science communications

Taken together, the research points to five principles for organisations that communicate science.



Trust

Understand what different audiences consider credible and distinguish between trust in institutions, in individuals and in specific scientific claims. Rising expectations around governance, transparency and contingency planning are making resilience a core business imperative.



Uncertainty

Explain the strength and limitations of evidence, distinguish established findings from emerging hypotheses and prepare audiences for the possibility that understanding will evolve.



Polarisation

Demonstrate independence, recognise different audience perspectives and keep scientific evidence distinguishable from the political positions associated with it.



Misinformation

Make credible evidence accessible and explain where it comes from, while avoiding alarmist messaging that undermines confidence in reliable information.



AI

Be transparent about sources and about the role of AI in producing or presenting content and make sure the organisation's work remains identifiable and attributable when AI systems summarise or reuse it.

Trust in scientists holds, while confidence in information about science and in the routes through which it travels, is weakening. AI accelerates both trends, as a tool for discovery and as a new intermediary that can blur where knowledge comes from and who stands behind it. The next section examines how these dynamics appear in media and social media coverage.

2. What the public conversation shows

Surveys and experiments describe how people relate to science. Media and social media coverage shows how the issues described in section 1 are evolving in public discussion. Using Meltwater, we compared the volume of online news and social media mentions on three themes over the past twelve months with the twelve months before.¹⁷

Total mentions on AI and scientific discovery 3 October 2025 - 2 October 2026



Source: Meltwater

Total mentions on AI-fabricated citations and studies 3 October 2025 - 2 October 2026



Source: Meltwater

Total mentions on AI as a source of health and science advice 3 October 2025 - 2 October 2026



Source: Meltwater

All three themes are growing quickly and the fastest growth concerns the most damaging of them.

Attention to AI in scientific discovery has almost doubled

Mentions of artificial intelligence in connection with scientific discovery rose from 713,000 to 1.35 million, an increase of 90%.¹⁷ The coverage shows AI moving from analysis to participation in research, with systems presented as able to design and run experiments, autonomous laboratories and AI-designed proteins and medicines. Results first published in peer-reviewed journals travel quickly into general news and social media, where they are reinterpreted for wider audiences.



Breakthroughs meet the sharpest scrutiny

Discoveries that challenge established understanding draw the most intense attention and the strongest doubt. When researchers in South Korea claimed in 2023 to have produced a room-temperature superconductor, LK-99, the claim spread worldwide before replication attempts failed. An analysis of 797 YouTube videos, 71,096 comments and 1,329 news articles found that non-specialist channels attracted 75.95% of views while producing 12.58% of the content and that public comments remained more sceptical than media coverage throughout.¹⁵ Corporate announcements face the same test. Microsoft’s 2025 claim of a topological qubit and Google’s AI co-scientist were both publicly challenged by independent researchers within weeks of their launch.^{20,28} The reception of a discovery depends heavily on who explains it after the announcement and on whether the original researchers take part in that conversation.



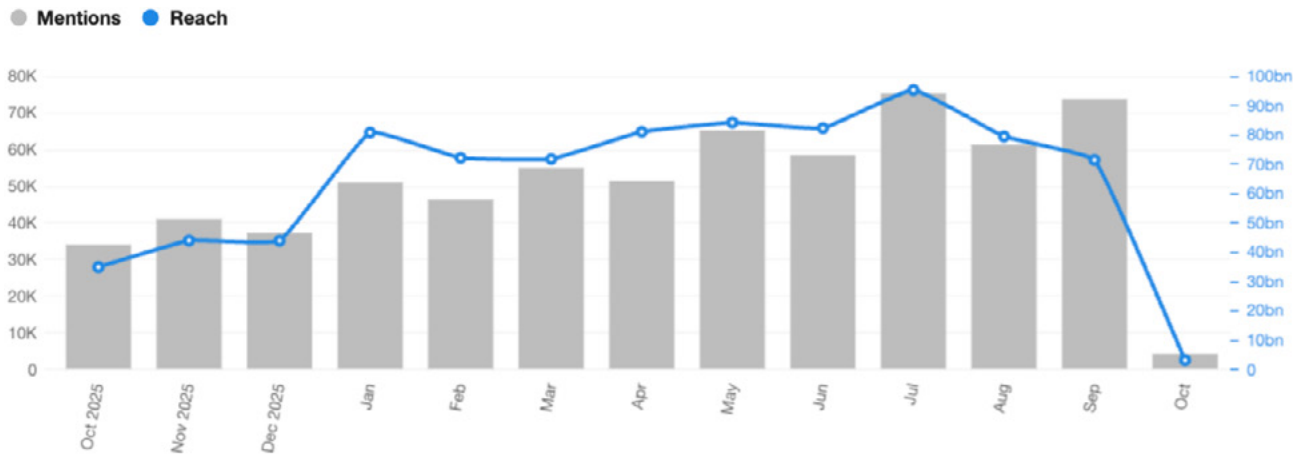
AI is becoming a routine source of health and science advice

Mentions of AI as a source of health and science advice almost tripled, from 226,000 to 656,000, an increase of 190%.¹⁷ The coverage describes people turning to AI when conventional care feels slow, incomplete or difficult to access, using it to interpret health information, prepare for appointments or make sense of personal data. The same stories repeatedly raise questions of accuracy, context, privacy and the role of clinicians. The intermediary described in section 1 is already part of everyday decisions.

Fabricated science has become a story in its own right

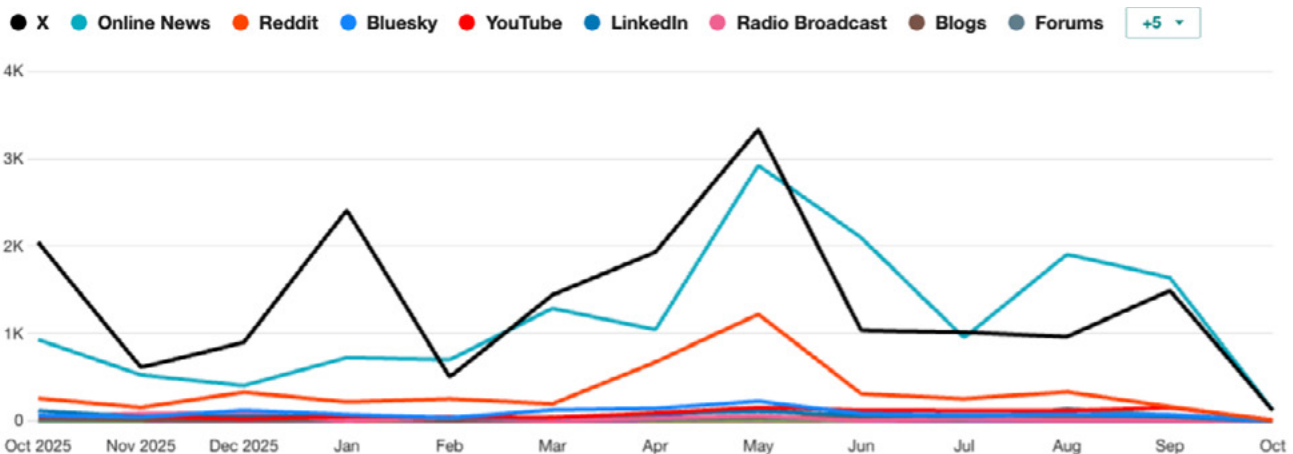
Mentions of citations and studies fabricated by AI rose sixfold, from 6,960 to 42,200, an increase of 506%.¹⁷ Social media carried much of this growth, with X accounting for 42% of mentions and online news for 36%. The issue now reaches well beyond research, into courts, education, journalism and public administration, wherever polished AI-generated text is used to support consequential decisions. The coverage converges on a single requirement, the need to verify AI output against authoritative sources before relying on it.

Monthly mentions of AI as a source of health and science advice
October 2025 to October 2026



Source: Meltwater

Monthly mentions of AI as a source of health and science advice
October 2025 to October 2026



Source: Meltwater

What this means for science communications

The three trends point in the same direction. Science is reaching the public faster, through more intermediaries and alongside a growing volume of counterfeit material. Each of these makes it harder for credible institutions to be recognised as the source of what people know and each increases the value of being clearly identifiable when they are.

3. What organisations should do

The evidence and the discourse analysis point to a change in where credibility is won. Trust in scientists holds, while the recognition of who produced a given piece of knowledge and on what basis, has become less certain. Who speaks for science now matters as much as what is said. The five principles at the end of section 1 describe what good practice looks like. For scientific organisations, universities and NGOs, putting them into practice follows four steps, each of which ends in a concrete decision.

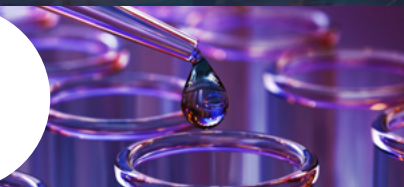
Step 1



DEFINE WHERE CREDIBILITY IS AT STAKE

Credibility is rarely at stake everywhere at once. The first step establishes which audiences matter most, whether policymakers, funders, journalists, peer institutions or the wider public, which topics and findings are most exposed to contestation and through which channels the organisation's knowledge now reaches people, including AI assistants that summarise it without a visit to the source. The output is a defined perimeter and a short statement of what the organisation wants to be recognised for.

Step 2



MEASURE HOW THE ORGANISATION IS SEEN AND CREDITED

The second step replaces assumptions with evidence. It examines how the organisation is portrayed in media and social media, who speaks for it, how its leading researchers are perceived as individuals, on which topics coverage is turning critical and how often it is named as the source of its own findings. The same questions now apply to AI assistants, which increasingly answer questions about the organisation's work without naming it, or name it inaccurately. The output is a baseline against which progress can be measured.

PREPARE FOR DISCOVERY, SCRUTINY AND REVISION

Breakthroughs attract the sharpest scrutiny and findings change. The third step prepares for both before they happen. It means agreeing how uncertainty will be expressed when results are announced, which researchers will speak for a finding once the first wave of coverage has passed, how the organisation will respond if a result is challenged or revised and how it will react if fabricated studies or impersonated experts begin to circulate under its name. Research shows that confidence is best protected when audiences have been prepared before the evidence changes.⁶

The questions worth asking are structural:

Step 3



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Which of our findings would do the most damage if revised without our audiences having been prepared for revision.

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What happens to our visibility if the main route to our knowledge becomes an AI assistant that does not name us.

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Which topic in our portfolio is most exposed to becoming an identity marker and whether our evidence or our people would then be judged.

?

What happens to our credibility if fabricated studies or impersonated experts begin to circulate under our name.

?

Which of our researchers are recognised as credible public voices on our key topics, and how we support them in building that profile.

Step 4

BUILD AN ORGANISATION THAT STAYS VISIBLE

The final step turns these decisions into lasting practice and it rests on four components.

★ **Narrative development** gives the organisation a clear story about what it wants to be recognised for. This is where the North Star sits, expressed with more precision than a general commitment to excellence and supported by a messaging hierarchy that keeps established findings, emerging hypotheses and institutional positions visibly distinct from one another.

★ **Scientists as messengers** ensure that the organisation's own researchers can explain their work in public, including after the announcement, when the reception of a discovery is decided. Audiences look for honesty and openness as well as competence, and a personal profile built in the media and on social platforms, anchored in each researcher's field, can make scientists appear more trustworthy without reducing their perceived competence.^{4,13} A wider range of credible voices, beyond the institution itself, reaches audiences that a single spokesperson cannot.

★ **Stakeholder mapping** identifies which audiences confer credibility on the organisation and how that set has changed. Journalists, policymakers and peer institutions remain central. Platforms and AI providers increasingly decide whether the organisation is named when its knowledge is used and they belong on the map.

★ **Monitoring and early warning track**, on a continuous basis, how the organisation is portrayed and credited in media and in AI-generated answers and signal when contestation begins to rise on one of its topics. Outputs that are structured, citable and clearly attributed make it more likely that the organisation's name travels with its findings.

The advantage therefore tends to sit with the organisation that has worked through these steps before a breakthrough, a revision or a controversy makes them urgent.

Conclusion

The familiar story of a public turning away from science does not match the evidence.

Trust in scientists holds across most of the world. What is changing is the way scientific authority is perceived, contested and mediated, through political identity, through an information environment that encourages doubt and increasingly through AI systems that stand between science and its audiences.

Media and social media coverage over the past year shows these pressures intensifying. Mentions of AI in scientific discovery have almost doubled, mentions of AI as a source of health and science advice have nearly tripled, and mentions of AI-fabricated citations and studies have grown sixfold.

The next generation of scientific advances will reach the public through the same channels described in this paper. Organisations that invest now in how their work is explained, attributed and defended will be better placed when their next discovery is announced.

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This is Leadership Navigation.

We hope you have found this report useful.

If you would like further detail about the findings, or more information about building credibility and visibility for scientific organisations, please contact:



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