

## EU agencies - How to manage the risk of reputational damage

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Good morning everybody and I'd like to welcome you all here and to thank the panels for giving their time to share their knowledge and views on what is a very important matter for every citizen in the EU and even beyond its borders.

Discussions and debate about public trust in agencies and other institutions that we rely on to help keep us safe, to keep us well and also to protect our environment are not new, but they have been given an added urgency and currency in this time when so much is contested and expressions such as 'post-truth', 'post-fact- and 'post-expert' have become commonplace.

The internet and social media have indeed democratised much of what was previously controlled by narrow groups, whether professional experts, professional journalists or professional politicians. The vertical, top down, information chain has now become flatter and more horizontal. Some substitute the word 'weaponised' for 'democratised' as they describe the darker uses that social media in particular has been put to, but at a minimum all of us realise that competition in and for the public sphere when it comes to influencing public opinion is intense.

And this is particularly important for the EU's regulatory agencies who citizens need to trust when it comes to making choices about matters about which those citizens have little if any informed, expert knowledge – whether that choice concerns a pesticide, a vaccine, , the ingredient in a food, or the safety of an airline.

The vast majority of the advice or opinions of the agencies go, in general, unremarked because levels of trust are high and the evidence of safe foods and safe medicines and other products is all around us. We all live with thousands of chemicals and food ingredients, we use hundreds of medicines and get on airplanes every day in our lives, and in general Europe has very high standards in all of these areas.

Some matters of course do become contentious and that is where the EU agencies – and indeed the Commission and Member State authorities - face their most challenging communication tasks. No longer is it enough simply to publish an opinion or conclusion and expect everybody's unquestioning assent.



We also all now recognise that the way in which citizens understand, assess, and act on information given to them by those in authority is much more complex than was previously understood. What is an obviously rational act or opinion to one person may not be so to the next. Some will accept and trust the voice of the authority, some are influenced instead by the emotional pull of a Tweet, a Facebook post, or a media opinion from a source that generally conforms to their own world view. And the capacity to manipulate those media is reaching previously unimaginable levels.

How agencies and others deal with this is much debated however there does appear to be a consensus that greater openness, a willingness to share the processes and the evidence that informed an opinion or conclusion, plus an openness to freer exchanges and collaboration are the keys to generating greater trust. Citizens expect the 'why' alongside the 'what'.

The core citizen demand of EU regulatory agencies is a very simple one: just do what you're supposed to do. Help keep us safe through unimpeachable standards in your work of excellence and independence.

Yet no agency or institution lives in a bubble. All operate in a political environment and many citizens are unaware of the complex interplay between the advisory role of the agencies and especially the central role of the Member States when it comes to product regulation and authorisation.

The force of lobbying – in a market environment where regulation can and does affect the bottom line of companies – is also intense and again most citizens are often unaware of who or what is influencing the decision making whether at EU or Member state level. Lobbying is of course legitimate and necessary if the political level policymakers are to be made fully aware of the likely impact of their work but it must be done openly and appropriately.

And it is within those spaces – of openness, of independence, and good governance – that my office's work comes in. Over the years we have dealt with complaints against and opened wider investigations into several of the regulatory agencies including access to documents cases, alleged conflicts of interest, inclusiveness regarding participation, essentially cases that challenge the agencies to confirm their independence, their openness and their accountability. And the agencies have worked well with us during our investigations, making improvements but acknowledging the need for further progress when necessary.

Sometimes of course the complainants ask us to do what we cannot – to check the scientific validity of an opinion, an authorisation, or an advice. We are not scientists – but what we do is check that the appropriate procedures have been followed and that safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of the process. And even if don't find maladministration we may suggest ways in which the work of the relevant agency can be made more accessible, both in terms of accessing documents and in allowing the public better to understand what it does, why it does it, and how it goes about doing it.

So I thank you for your attention and I look forward to the discussion.

