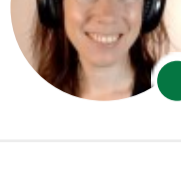




# Science & trust: How to engage skeptics

Published on October 25, 2021 | [Edit article](#) | [View stats](#)



**Federica Bressan**  
Researcher & Science communicator

6 articles

How to engage people who resist "believing" what science says? From anti-vaxers to flat-earthers, we all know someone who just refuses to get along with the official version of the story at hand, be it a virus or the shape of our planet.

Degrees of skepticism may vary. Someone may show legitimate reservations on getting a vaccine that was developed so quickly, others will go full conspiracy and say that vaccines are part of a plan to sterilise humanity. Each person is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all recipe to engage a skeptic. A few pointers, however, can be really useful.

### Do not debate

A debate is like a duel with words. Participants normally represent a position which they defend. This is not the model of interaction you want to adopt when engaging a skeptic. Try to have a conversation instead. Keep an open mind. Why?

Because there is a rationale behind every doubt. You have to be ready to listen to why the other person believes or refuses to believe something. In turn, they might ask you why you believe in science, or why you got vaccinated, and you may be surprised by your own answers.

### Rationality does not win

Maybe you believe that everybody should get vaccinated and you feel very strongly about this. You start a conversation with a skeptic or anti-vaxer to "convince" them that you are right. No matter how right you think you are, entering a conversation knowing how you want it to end is a "dangerous way of entering a conversation" (min. 34:31 of the video linked at the bottom of this page).

We may think that some anti-scientific positions are so untenable, that it would be easy to prove the skeptic wrong one rational argument at a time. If this was the case, we would have solved the problem a long time ago. It is never the case that you change a skeptic's mind by force of rational arguments.

The trust issue goes much deeper than that. That is why you may want to explain your position by integrating it in a broader system of values.

### A broader value system

There is nothing more annoying than someone telling you what you should do and how you should live. You should believe in science! How can you not believe in science? The evidence is all there. You should get vaccinated! The numbers show...

Instead of attacking the skeptic's position, try to explain your own. Can you build a case in favour of this position? You think that everybody should get vaccinated. Very well. Why?

Inscribe your convictions in a broader system of values. For example, you chose to get vaccinated because this shows care for other people in your community. Getting vaccinated is just one of the things that you chose to do (coherence) to increase our chances of getting out of this pandemic together, showing support and unity. Following the guidelines of public health authorities seems to contribute to keeping order in a time of latent social unrest. And provided some reasons for concern are valid and we should talk about them, an outburst of chaos would not help the situation. Therefore, I got vaccinated because this is my way of contributing to social order, avoiding violent outbreaks. Having said this, I share some concerns regarding issues x, y and z, and we should definitely have that discussion.

In the bigger picture, the vax or anti-vax issue on which we risk to get fixated, shows its interconnectedness with other issues all the way up to a societal and moral level. That is why some people get triggered by these conversations: it challenges their identity. You don't want to get vaccinated, therefore you show no respect for your loved ones! This is a personal attack and I don't blame anyone for feeling hurt.

In my view, both parties would have a point in this situation. That is why it's important to have an open conversation where both parties explain their positions and nobody tries to "convince" the other. We might discover that we have much more ground in common than we think! It's ok to have doubts and fears. This is where science with its evidence, and our moral repertoire with its values, can help us make truly informed choices in a civilised way.

### It takes time

Caring for one's community, abiding by the law, or being a respectable scientist, are not isolated actions, they happen over time. They require consistency. This is how trust is built. **Trust is built over time.** When you see someone doing the same thing over and over, it becomes predictable. It is reassuring. You start having expectations about that behaviour, based on your previous observations.

By embodying our values, we keep our behaviour consistent over time and show that it produces certain results, e.g. creating a better community, bringing people closer together, improve our kids' lives in some way. These choices, that reflects these values, produce these results. The most powerful argument of all.

### Closing credits

The ideas in this article are taken from my interview with philosophy professor Maarten Van Dyck of Ghent University in Belgium. I have expanded on them using my own words. Prof. Van Dyck has read and approved of this article before publication. I encourage you to listen to the full interview linked below for this and other questions on "Science & Trust".

Full interview: <https://youtu.be/Smrdp3hkSXE>

Web page with show notes: <http://podcast.federicabressan.com/maarten-van-dyck.php>

The podcast is available on YouTube, iTunes, Spotify and your favourite podcast apps.

Or download the mp3:  
[http://podcast.federicabressan.com/download/mp3/Technoculture\\_46\\_Maarten\\_Van\\_Dyck\\_\(Science\\_and\\_trust\)\\_Smrdp3hkSXE.mp3](http://podcast.federicabressan.com/download/mp3/Technoculture_46_Maarten_Van_Dyck_(Science_and_trust)_Smrdp3hkSXE.mp3)

Published by



**Federica Bressan**  
Researcher & Science communicator  
Published · 1h

6 articles

My interview on "Science & Trust" with philosophy professor Maarten Van Dyck was so dense with information that I decided to unpack some of it in short articles. This is about how to engage skeptics without getting frustrated because rational arguments seem to have no power over them.  
The full interview is linked at the bottom of the article.  
[#interview](#) [#science](#) [#trust](#) [#skepticism](#) [#technoculturepodcast](#) [UGent](#)

Like Comment Share 4 · 46 views

Reactions



0 Comments

Add a comment...



**Federica Bressan**  
Researcher & Science communicator

### More from Federica Bressan

**My final paper: Looking back on 10 years of scientific publishing**  
Federica Bressan on LinkedIn

**Podcasting beyond audio: The importance of transcripts**  
Federica Bressan on LinkedIn

**ew Trump pandemic adviser pushes Atlas blasts reports he backs 'community': 'I've never...'**  
The UK's response to coronavirus: 'He experts say. Here's way and its risks ex'  
Science communication in (a time of) crisis  
Federica Bressan on LinkedIn

**ESOP2020**  
EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF OPEN FORM TRIESTE  
ESOP2020: Science Communication in a Time of Crisis  
Federica Bressan on LinkedIn

[See all 6 articles](#)