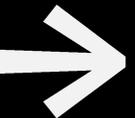


BREAKTHROUGHS & BARRIERS

Communicating trust in
science in the age
of conspiracy.

March 2026

bring tomorrow closer





Research methodology

This research was commissioned by science marketing consultancy, Diffusion and conducted by Censuswide among a nationally representative sample of 2,005 UK adults aged 16 and over. Censuswide is a full member of the Market Research Society and operates in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct and ESOMAR principles.

Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council, ensuring that all research meets recognised standards of transparency, rigour and independence. Fieldwork took place in June 2025. Survey results have been weighted to be nationally representative of the UK population by age, gender and region.

Limitations and interpretation

As with all survey research, the findings reflect self reported attitudes at a specific point in time. Responses capture perceptions and stated opinions rather than observed behaviour, and views may evolve as public awareness, media coverage and regulatory decisions change.

Many technologies included in the research are still emerging, meaning levels of familiarity varies and uncertainty should be expected. Results should therefore be interpreted as a snapshot of current sentiment, highlighting patterns, contrasts and communication challenges rather than fixed or final public positions.



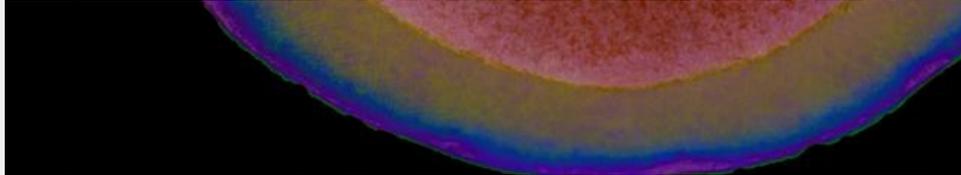
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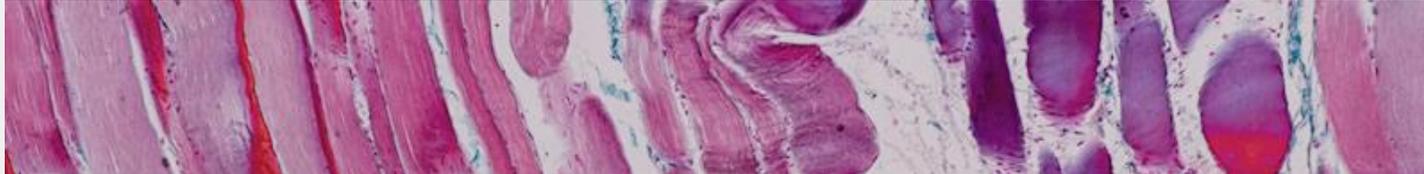
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The need for trust in science has never been greater.

Ivana Farthing, Science Communication Lead, Diffusion



As we start 2026, the need for trust in science has never been greater. While the speed of discovery accelerates, aided by new techniques and technology, the rate at which breakthroughs are reaching mainstream adoption is failing to keep pace. The reasons for that are complex, including scarcer funding and restrictive regulation, among others. But, in an 'age of conspiracy', I'd argue that inconsistent and outdated communication is now one of the biggest barriers to scientific progress.

Just look around. We can see crackpots and conspiracy theorists stifling research into new mRNA treatments. We see nascent industries like cultivated meat facing not only sales bans, but research bans too in several US states. And we also see a continuing and concerted backlash against decarbonisation, from renewables to EVs.

The stakes, for all of us, are high. The effects of misinformation and misunderstood innovations impacts public health, climate action, economic stability, and public confidence in future research. The field of science is evolving rapidly, but its approach to building trust is not adapting fast enough. Against a new PR landscape, too many innovators are still playing by the old rules and losing the game.

That said, I remain an optimistic science and technology communicator. Leading Diffusion's work with ambitious innovators, I wanted to commission this research to help them quantify the barriers to trust we are seeing in the UK, and to identify new approaches that can help build solid public support for their work.

In the pages that follow, this report sets out a clearer picture of how mainstream trust in science is formed, tested and, in some cases, lost.

It looks beyond individual headlines or controversies to examine the deeper forces shaping trust today: who is seen as a credible voice, how authority is earned, and how scientific ideas can best move out of the lab and into public life.

We explore how the terrain of influence has shifted. No single British institution, media outlet or spokesperson now owns the conversation on science. We find support for novel science is often highly fragmented by demographics and highly dependent on context. This has profound implications for how communication strategies now need to be designed and implemented.

We also look over the horizon at public attitudes towards potentially consequential areas of emerging science likely to face reputational challenge. These include biotech breakthroughs including genetic modification and precision breeding of crops, precision fermentation and cultivated meat, alongside controversial climate interventions often grouped under the term geoengineering.

While we find strong opinions are already taking hold for these sectors, there is also room for optimism. Our research identifies a 'Persuadable Middle' of the UK public that remains open to hearing more before they make up their minds. As we conclude in our 'New Rules' for science communication, speed and consistency of engagement to reach this and other audiences, is now paramount.

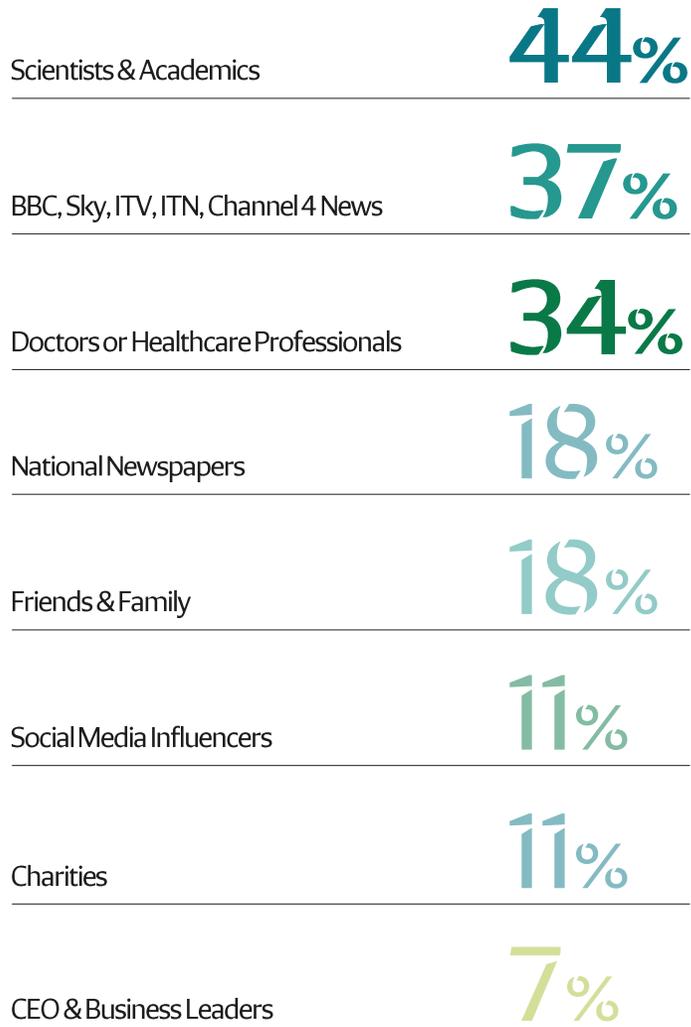
I hope this report helps you to shape a stronger foundation for more impactful science communication. If we get this right, advances already made can be safeguarded, new research is more likely to be funded, promising startups can attract investment, and innovators ready to commercialise can do so with public trust on their side. It's all to play for!



1. THE MESSENGER IS THE MESSAGE



Q: From which of the following do you feel you get trustworthy information about new developments in science and health technology?



We begin by looking at where the UK gets its news and information about science, and we immediately uncover an uncomfortable truth. Across our representative sample of 2,000 UK adults, we don't find a single source that can command the trust of the majority of the public.

Reassuringly perhaps, scientists and academics do come the closest, securing the confidence of 44% of respondents as a trustworthy source of information. Even an organisation held in such high public esteem as the National Health Service (NHS) is only trusted by 36% of the population.

Scepticism is not confined to the fringes; our research finds it cuts a broadly similar swath across age groups and social backgrounds. We do find men putting more faith in less traditional sources of information on science and technology - 15% trust social media influencers, compared to just 8% of women.

Beyond the scientific community, trust deteriorates quickly. Fewer than 1 in 10 people see the UK Prime Minister or Health Secretary as reliable sources on science, falling to just 7% for CEOs. Put simply, many of the voices science has relied on to build public confidence no longer carry the same weight, which makes reaching large parts of the public quickly far more challenging than in the past.

Finding the right science messengers

For business leaders and founders, that figure is especially stark. The very people responsible for funding and commercialising scientific innovation are, in general, viewed by the public as among the least credible to talk to them about it. For company spokespeople, investing in building authority in their personal brands is no longer optional.

A question of confidence

So scientists now face a broader responsibility. Beyond advancing research and discovery, increasingly they now also need to grasp the mantle of Explainer-in-Chief for the fields they lead. It's a role that many scientists and researchers have traditionally been reluctant to take on. There is often a fear that their work will be misrepresented or 'sensationalised' by the media.

At the same time, many struggle with the compromises around language and terminology that journalism demands,

particularly the need to simplify complex ideas so non-technical audiences can genuinely understand the science and why it matters.

But as we're increasingly seeing, it's a squeamishness that comes at a cost. When scientists do not play a visible role in explaining how new technologies work and why they matter, less trusted voices will often fill the gap instead, in ways that can threaten public support, future funding and regulatory approval for their work.

CEOs can't communicate alone

What does this mean more broadly? Science communication today needs to build a coalition of credible voices.

CEOs and founders will often be best placed to communicate vision and urgency, but they must be consistently supported by other scientists, academics, and independent experts who can explain the evidence and provide context.

This puts the onus on communication professionals to be able to work with scientists and empower them with language that gets the dynamic right between accuracy and understanding, and with balanced arguments that are now essential for building public trust.



Q: Which people do you personally trust as a source of accurate information on scientific or environmental topics? (Select all that apply)

Beyond trust in broad groups, we also wanted to understand whether individual figures cut through these category trends. To do this, we surveyed public trust in a range of well-known commentators who regularly appear in the UK across both traditional and social media discussing science and environmental issues.

The British public placed Sir David Attenborough at the top of a provided long list, chosen as a reliable source by 59% of respondents. Again, it is perhaps telling that 4 in 10 people do not trust such a respected and well-known figure who has spent seven decades translating nature and science for the public.

Below Attenborough, similar figures from public service broadcasting top the list; Professor Brian Cox (44%), Chris Packham (25%) and John Craven (23%).

Alongside them sit figures who blend science, business and climate advocacy, such as Bill Gates (20%) and King Charles (21%).

Greta Thunberg emerges as a polarising figure, selected as accurate information source by just 14% overall but rising to 32% among 16-to-24 year-olds. This is inline with Elon Musk’s score at 13%, but with that support starkly split between men (22%) and women (6%).

Among political figures on our list, the contrast is striking. Almost twice as many people trust Reform Party leader, Nigel Farage (11%) as the UK’s energy and environment secretary, Ed Miliband (6%) on science and environmental issues. This gap illustrates the challenge facing the current Labour government in the UK as it seeks to lead a national conversation on Net Zero.

We also find other generational differences in trust. A growing number of science-literate content creators are building younger audiences online, using short-form video and conversational formats to explain complex topics. Science influencers like Big Manny were trusted by 15% of 16-to-24s, with ‘The Physics Girl’ enjoying 18% support among 25-to-34s.

As Sir David Attenborough nears 100, an inevitable question arises - will anyone ever command majority trust in this area with the public again? The answer is unlikely to be a single successor. We will more likely see a new and more fragmented generation of commentators and experts, with appeal to niche audiences. The task of selecting science ambassadors will need ever more careful consideration.



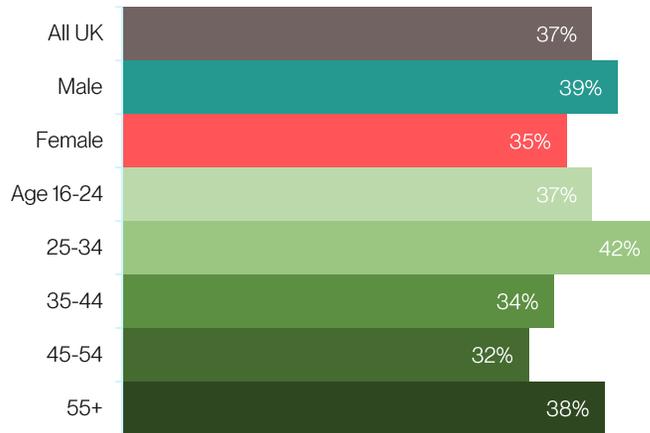
2. SCIENCE'S MEDIA GATEKEEPERS



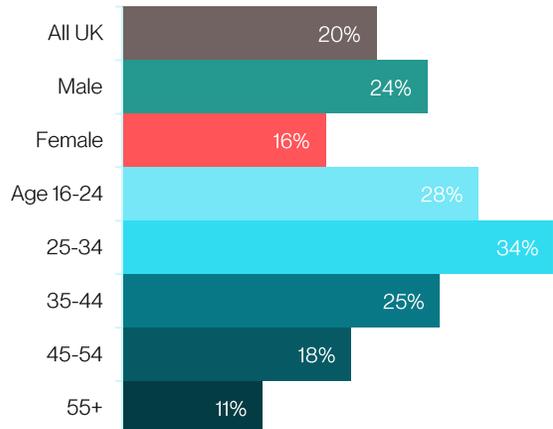


Q: From which of the following do you feel you get trustworthy information about new developments in science and health technology?

National Broadcast (BBC, Sky, ITV, ITN, Channel 4 News)



Search (Google & Wikipedia)



Our complex science media diet

Having looked at who the public trust, we now turn to the media and online platforms through which those and other voices are most likely to be heard.

Our research finds that broadcast news is the closest thing the UK has to a cross-generational science channel. Trust holds steady across age groups, with around 40% of under 45s and 38% of the 55 plus group saying they trust broadcasters such as the BBC, Sky, ITV, ITN and Channel 4.

Broadcast TV and news coverage remains highly valuable for big moments, when a scientific breakthrough needs national visibility. While news segments are invariably short and often do not provide much time to discuss science and technology in-depth or cover all the consequences, it still delivers significant reach with credibility, in a way no other media platform currently can.

Search and digital platforms: the default route for younger adults

Diffusion’s research finds significant age-related differences when it comes to the use of online search platforms (like Google and Wikipedia) as science information sources. We see that trust in them rises sharply from 28% among 16-to-24s to 34% among 25-to-34s, then drops to just 11% among the 55 plus group. Online trust also leans male, with men more likely than women to trust what they find on Google, Wikipedia, and via platforms like Reddit.

Online search is evolving rapidly through AI generated summaries, which can be heavily shaped by traditional media articles as source material. So, while they may not be read in large numbers by younger audiences, respected mainstream media coverage on science can still influence the information younger users of search and generative AI are reading.

Influencers and podcasters: narrow reach, strong pull among the young

Attitudes to influencers show the most dramatic generational divide in the entire dataset. Trust peaks at 24% among 25-to-34s and 20% among 16-to-24s, before collapsing to 3% among the 55 plus group. Podcasts follow a similar pattern, remaining niche overall at 7%, but climbing to 15% among 25-to-34s.

While influencers are currently a broadly emerging source of trusted information on science, they can be important context-shapers for specific audiences. Younger adults often view creators as relatable and authentic, in a way that traditional media can struggle to emulate.

The reach of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and their ability to spread (mis)information, now makes early engagement of respected and credible online influencers a strategic part of any science comms plan.



Science reporting's weak spots

Reporters covering science have a difficult task, that's only become harder as the media landscape fragments. Controversies, including over vaccine safety, and online misinformation have arguably contributed to growing scepticism on the veracity of what many see and read in the media on science.

We therefore probably shouldn't be too shocked to see that our research finds 1 in 4 (26%) people say they struggle to tell whether science stories in the media are accurate, rising to 30% for those aged over 55.

Presenting both sides of the debate

Coverage of science is also seen by some as too shallow and lacking in balance. Around 25% of younger adults say they rarely see reporting that includes the risks or limitations of new technologies. There is also frustration with the tone of reporting. Overall, 1 in 5 (20%) believe coverage 'focuses too much on controversy'.

Despite these concerns, Diffusion's research points towards opportunities to build better public trust in science coverage. However, some of the changes we find the public is looking for would likely require a re-think and re-tooling of science reporting by mainstream media outlets.

For instance, we find 27% of adults state they would trust science reporting more if it was reviewed by independent experts, rising to 31% among the 55 plus age group.

Putting this into practice would need to see third-party fact-checking services, academic reviewers and external scientific advisors being brought into the reporting process sooner and more routinely.

More space for explanation

Echoing our earlier findings on who the public trusts, 25% of people feel scientists are not given enough room in media coverage to explain their work properly. This is where we see greater use of explainer content, particularly via video, alongside scientist-authored opinion columns and segments could help meet the UK public's desire for more context from trusted experts.

We are increasingly seeing a more polarised media, taking strong stances on science and technology, from EV technology to climate change in general. We find 17% feel science stories are often exaggerated or sensationalised.

How science and technology journalism needs to adapt to counter the rise of conspiracy and misinformation is a topic that would easily warrant its own report. That said, the issues with the public perception of reporting we find in our research, does lay down a challenge to serious media organisations, for whom trust is central to commercial credibility.

The issue we face is that many newsrooms now work with fewer specialist reporters, limited research support and intense pressure to publish at speed, and in high volume. How to build the resource needed for deeper fact-checking and finding more balanced voices, will not be easy.

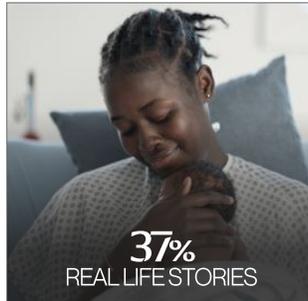
Making journalists' lives easier

That said, comms professionals can be cognisant of these challenges and do all they can to help resource and time-strapped journalists to fill any information gaps.

Simple backgrounders, case studies, visual explainers, properly-prepped spokespeople, and summaries of peer-reviewed evidence can all make a real difference in reporters' lives.



Q: Which formats do you think would help you the most to better understand complex scientific issues or new scientific developments? (Select up to 5)



How do we want to hear about science?

Communicating science and technology well relies on more than just solid media relations. Today, being able to effectively speak directly to audiences via owned and social channels, across a variety of content formats matters just as much. It's also a false distinction, with traditional media outlets crying out for brilliant videos, animations and infographics that can help explain complex concepts to their readers and viewers.

But where exactly should that investment in content development go? Understanding which formats different audiences prefer to help them understand science and new developments, is where our research looked next.

Long-form content can't be overlooked

We find that documentary-style programmes are the most popular format overall, chosen by 42% of respondents. Despite the prevailing wisdom that attention spans are short, this preference for longer-form content where there is the time and space to explain ideas and provide balance and context, is encouraging.

In a similar vein, we see Q and A style interviews with scientists also perform well across all age groups at 29%, showing again that the public values hearing from scientists and experts directly.

The enduring power of case studies

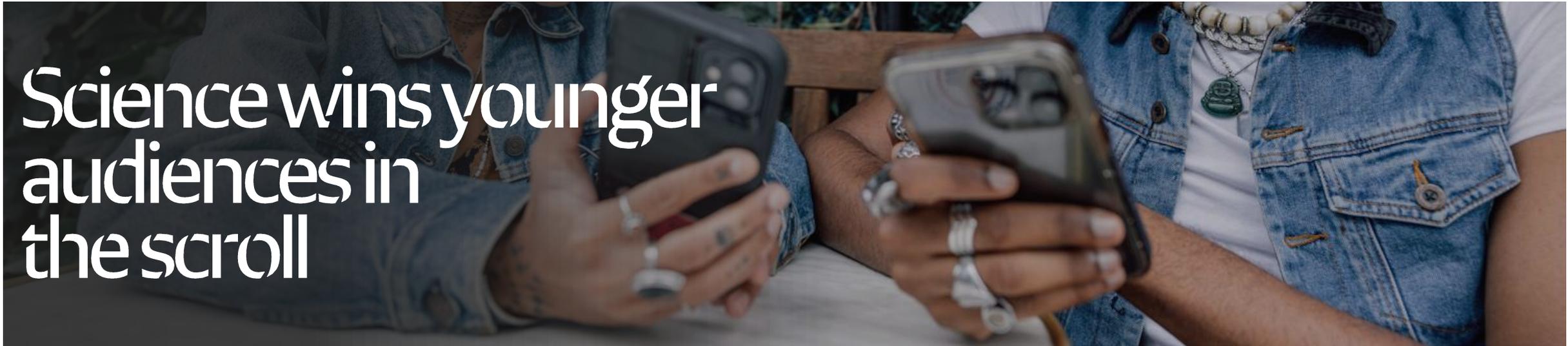
Real life stories about how science affects people follow closely at 37%, rising to 40% for women. Case studies, where the impacts of new science can be explained through lived experience, have a unique ability to establish trust through making an emotional connection. Finding customer case studies is often easier said than done, but in our experience the investment in partnering with advocates willing to share their stories publicly can really pay dividends.

News coverage still matters

News articles "written in plain, simple language" still matter when we ask how the UK public want to understand new scientific developments. That said, their importance clearly shifts by age. Just under a quarter (24%) of 16-to-24 year olds say this is how they prefer to learn about science, rising to 30% for 25-to-44s.

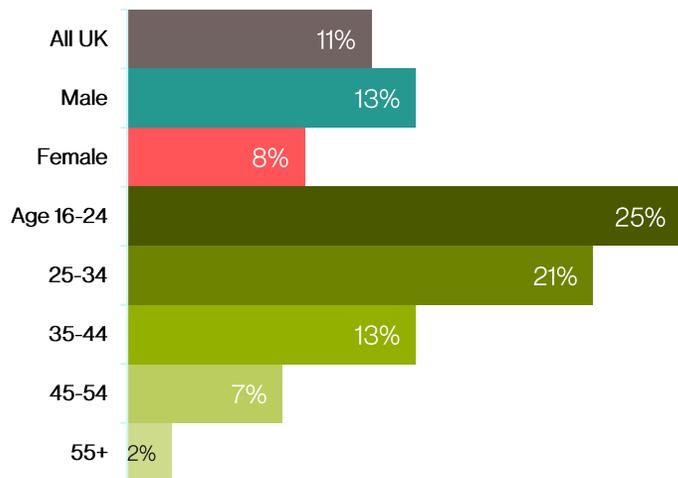
Amongst older audiences, the picture changes noticeably. Over four in ten (41%) people aged 55 plus point to plain-language news articles as a preferred source, highlighting the importance that news coverage still retains for this audience.





Science wins younger audiences in the scroll

Percentage of respondents who rank TikTok/Instagram style videos as a format that would help better understand complex scientific issues:



Traditional media clearly still has an important role to play, but our research also highlights that younger audiences are more open to a wider range of formats.

Short explainer videos, as found on platforms like YouTube and company websites, appeal strongly to younger adults, with interest rising to 25% among 16-to-24s and peaking at 29% among 25-to-34s. This falls steadily to just 11% among the 55 plus group.

We see a similar age-preference trend when it comes to social media videos on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Here there is an added challenge with content driven by algorithms that can reward entertainment over accuracy, which can favour the spread of misinformation.

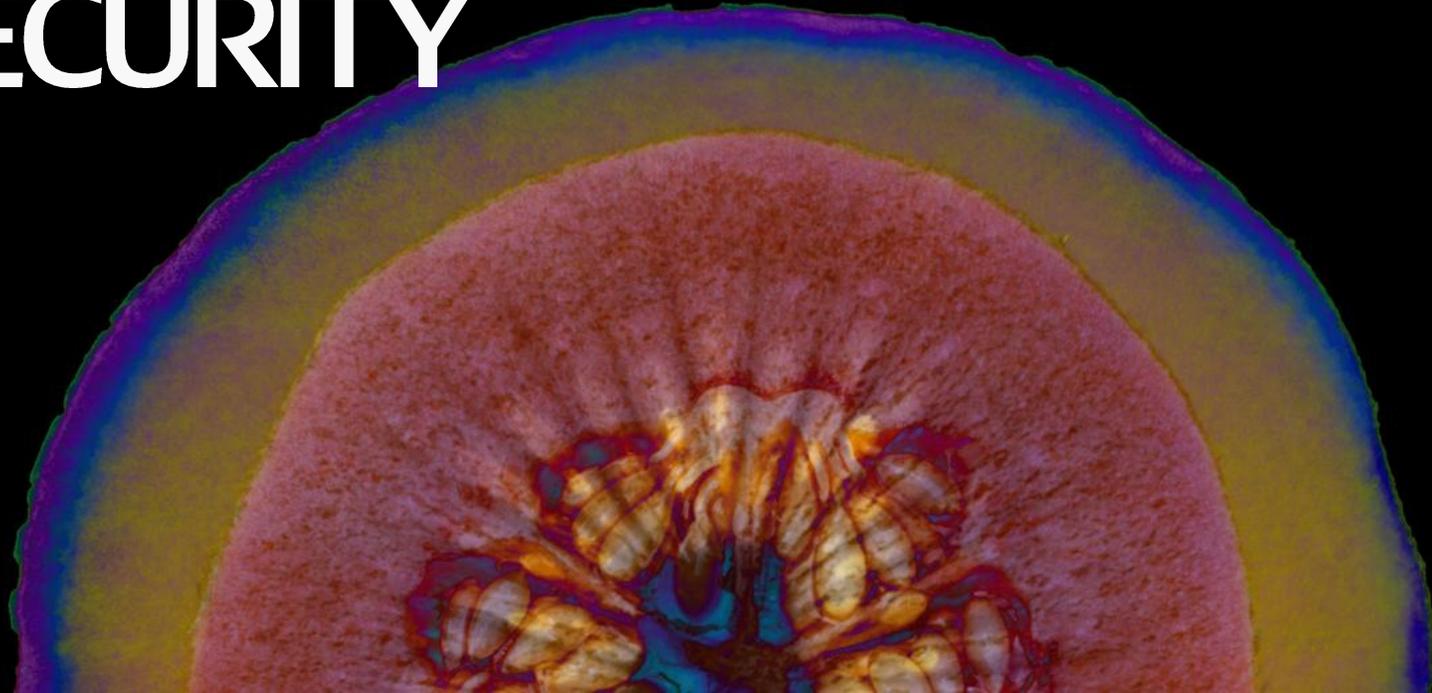
The rise of the podcast

The growing popularity of podcasts has been one of the strongest media consumption trends over the past few years. Our research also shows that this applies to science and technology. While only 15% of people overall expressed a preference for podcast content, that interest rises to 23% among 16-to-24s and peaks at 27% among 25-to-34s, before declining with age. Podcasts are another long-form format with the advantage of allowing interviews and discussions on science and tech the time to breathe and be explored.

Overall, the implications of these findings is that going forward science communicators will need to layer their messaging across a broad variety of content formats. This will allow stakeholders to consume science news on their own terms.



3. ENGINEERING FOOD SECURITY





Food science can't afford to leave the public with a bitter aftertaste



Food security in the UK and wider developed world has long been taken for granted, but recent years have been a loud wake-up call. The start of the Ukraine war in 2022 triggered a global shock to grain and fertiliser supplies, pushing up input costs for farmers and food manufacturers worldwide. Food and drink price inflation has remained stubbornly high ever since.

In the five years from 2020 to 2025 UK food prices increased by more than a third. Alongside conflict, and unforgivable amounts of waste, the food system is under increasing strain from climate change, environmental degradation and a global population that has surpassed 8 billion.

Rising food inflation is having profound implications

Harvests globally have been hit by a cocktail of extreme heat, unexpected cold snaps and prolonged periods of drought and flooding. From the price of beef, to staples like coffee, tea and chocolate, these pressures are clear to see for consumers as they walk down the supermarket aisle. We have seen the anger at the failure of food prices to return to 'normal' manifest itself at the ballot box in the US and elsewhere.

In response to these challenges, France's President Macron has talked about a tipping point having been reached, what he's called the 'end of abundance' where even wealthy countries can no longer take for granted old certainties on access to essential resources like food and water.

Can scientific breakthroughs usher in a new era of food abundance? It would be a mistake to fall into technological solutionism; there are unlikely to be any silver bullets. But the scale of the challenge means that novel food approaches will likely need to be a more urgent part of the solution to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change.

That's why as part of this report, Diffusion wanted to take a snapshot of public attitudes to some of the most promising and potentially most consequential developments in foodtech, including genetically modified crops, cultivated meat and precision fermentation.

Can GM 2.0 avoid the same old traps?

As we argue throughout this report, even having these options on the table as policy choices will be highly dependent on public support. We have already witnessed over 25 years of lost innovation in GM foods and precision breeding, due to strategic communication and policy failures at the turn of the millennium.

Many of the monsters conjured up at the time by the 'Frankenstein Foods' movement have since proven to be fictitious, but the fact malnutrition and hunger continued over that period is an undeniable fact.

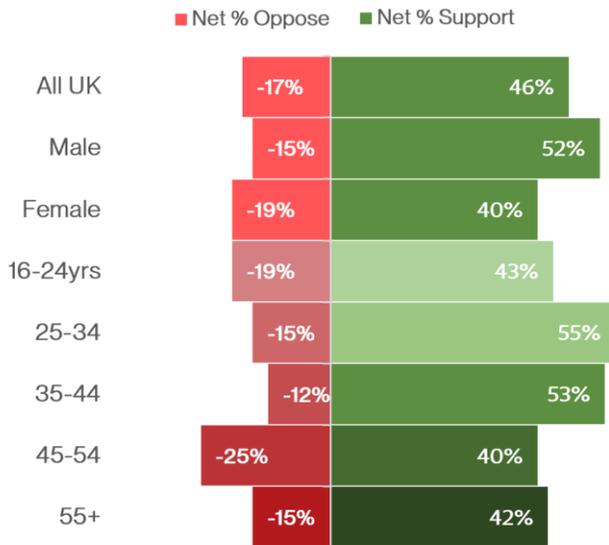
The food system is one that humanity cannot ignore. How we ensure there is broad trust for new food technologies to be researched, regulated and promoted, could well be an existential question in the years ahead.



Will the British public welcome GM foods?

PRECISION BREEDING OF CROPS:

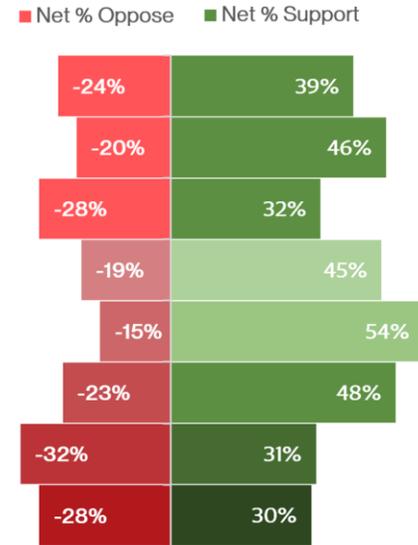
Q: Based on what you know or have heard, would you generally support or oppose the development and widespread use of Precision Breeding in crops?



(Definition provided: where technology is used to make changes to a plant's own DNA to improve its resistance to drought or diseases, without adding genes from other species).

GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS:

Q: Based on what you know or have heard, would you generally support or oppose the development and widespread use of Genetically Modified crops?



(Definition provided: where technology is used to add DNA to a plant from a different species - like bacteria - to give it new characteristics, like pest resistance or higher vitamin content).

The growing frequency of poor harvests in the UK and around the world has pushed genetic technologies back to the centre of the food security debate. Many staple crop varieties were developed for a very different climate and are struggling with more frequent heat spikes and droughts to flooding, and the spread of new pests and plant diseases.

At the same time, farmers are under pressure to reduce their reliance on costly inputs such as fossil fuel-derived fertilisers and pesticides, which bring both environmental and financial strain. This is where GM crop varieties could play a meaningful role, bred to be better adapted to climate extremes, resistant to pests and disease and able to thrive in poorer soils, helping to maintain yields with fewer external chemical inputs.

Genetic techniques may turn out to be one of our most valuable tools for securing food production in a harsher climate, but it is also a technology area we know to be extremely vulnerable to misinformation and fear-based narratives.

Researchers in their labs can develop as many resilient crop varieties as they want, but none of it matters if politicians do not provide regulatory approval, or consumers refuse to buy. So, just how big are the barriers out there?

Looking across the GM spectrum

When it comes to quantifying attitudes to genetic modification, we face a challenge in that the term covers a wide variety of techniques, familiar to scientists, but not most of the public. For that reason, this research tested public attitudes to two contrasting GM approaches.

Firstly, we looked at Precision Breeding, which makes targeted edits to a plant's own DNA to produce new varieties. Secondly, we examined transgenic GM, which, more controversially, introduces DNA from another species to confer advantages, such as disease resistance.





The GM age and gender divide



We find there are significant differences in how the UK public responded to each of these two genetic techniques. Precision Breeding commands the higher level of support, with 46% 'supportive of its development and widespread use to produce crops.' Support rises to 55% among those aged 25-to-34. Overall opposition remains relatively low at 17%.

We find transgenic GM sits in a different place in public perception. Support drops to 39% overall, with opposition rising to 24%. Among over 55s, opposition is higher at 28% and support falls to 30%, the lowest of any age group.

While our research did not measure the causes of opposition, this reticence from older consumers could in part reflect the lingering influence of the late 1990s and early 2000s GM foods controversy, and the effective ban on sales of GM products that followed.

Men are more comfortable with GM

One of the clearest patterns in the data is the gender divide. Men are consistently more open to the use of genetic techniques to create new crop varieties, while women show higher levels of opposition, with a larger proportion yet to make up their minds.

For Precision Breeding, male support hits 52%, with 15% opposing. Women, by contrast, sit at 40% support, with 19% opposing. Female 'don't knows' to this question at 14% are over twice as high as for men, at just 6%. This gender split is also seen in the data when asked about Genetically Modified crops.

If women feel uncertain or unconvinced about the role of genetic technologies in food production, this caution could have an outsized influence on which products succeed and which struggle to gain traction.

Women are still more likely to be the primary decision-makers for household groceries and meal planning in the UK.

For food companies and researchers, this highlights the importance of targeted communication. Women are not rejecting these technologies outright. Higher levels of neutrality and uncertainty suggest many simply do not feel equipped with enough trusted information to make a confident judgement.

Closing the communication gap with this specific group will not be optional as biotech companies and farmers seek approval for new GM crops and ingredients to become part of our future food system.





4. CULTIVATING CONSENT





Can cultivated meat cross the acceptance barrier?

Heading into 2026, cultivated meat is entering a far tougher phase of its development. The science which uses animal cells to directly grow meat and fish without the need for antibiotics, hormones, and steroids is now well established. The potential for this technology to produce meat using a fraction of the land, energy and water requirements of traditional farming, is also real.

The challenge is now a dual one, how to scale commercially, and to do so against a mounting backlash in some countries.

After several years of rapid growth, soaring funding, optimistic timelines and bold claims, in late-2025 cultivated meat has faced strong headwinds. Several high-profile players have scaled back operations, restructured, or in the case of Believer Meats, failed altogether. The effect has been to reinforce rising investor scepticism and intensify questions about the long-term commercial viability of the sector.

Can the backlash bandwagon be stopped?

As investment has slowed, political scrutiny has intensified in several markets. In countries such as the US, public debate has rapidly given way to outright political resistance, through bans and moratoriums in many states. This is before cultivated meat has fully faced its ultimate arbiter – the consumer.

That reputational vulnerability has been compounded by a lack of early consumer engagement and proactive communication by most cultivated meat innovators or food industry bodies. This has left much of the debate to be shaped by opponents.

The communication challenge is a complex one. In several markets, cultivated meat has become a stand in for wider cultural anxieties about food, identity and control, rather than a discussion grounded in what the technology actually is, how it works and what problems it is trying to solve.

As the research that follows shows, public attitudes are already becoming polarised. Many people have formed strong views, driven as much by visceral reactions to 'lab-grown meat' and perceived risks, as by scientific facts.

Creating a UK market

The timing of this research is important. To date, only one company, Meatly, has secured regulatory approval in the UK and Europe, and only for cultivated meat for pet food. They are not likely to have the market to themselves for long.

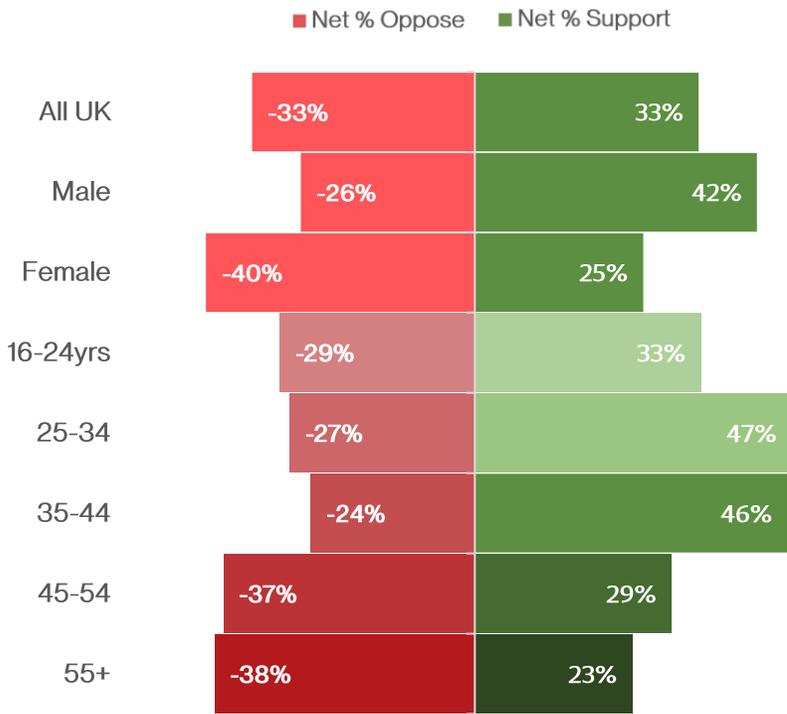
The UK Food Standards Agency is working closely with global players on creating a smooth regulatory and approval framework, with the first cultivated meat or seafood products for human consumption expected to be approved within the next 24-months.

That may seem like a long way away, but with attitudes already hardening, the battle to win and shape public opinion needs to get underway now.



Q: Based on what you know or have heard, would you generally support or oppose the development and widespread use of cultivated meat and seafood in the UK?

(Definition provided: Making real meat or fish food products by growing animal or fish cells in a lab or factory, without needing to raise or catch animals.)



Consumers have a strong 'gut reaction' to cultivated meat.

Public attitudes toward cultivated meat in the UK fall into three broad camps. A third of the population are supportive of its development and use, a third are opposed, and a final third have yet to make up their minds.

Given cultivated meat is not yet approved for human consumption in the UK, it is striking that 2 in 3 (66%) people have already formed a view. Contrast this with Precision Fermentation, a similarly nascent technology, which we look at later in this report, where opposition sits at just 24%.

The difference points to an additional communication hurdle - a more visceral reaction to the idea of meat that does not come from conventional meat production.

As cultivated meat startups move closer to launching consumer products, they are not starting with a blank canvas. Instead, they face a public that has already begun sorting itself into camps, even before critical considerations like taste and price.

Within this landscape, the remaining third of the population becomes especially important. This 'Persuadable Middle' has not yet taken a fixed position and is likely to be open to reassurance, explanation and real-world evidence.

The larger question is whether anyone is actively speaking to them yet in a positive, accessible and credible way. If that space is left empty, by innovators and industry bodies, and indeed governments, it risks being filled by louder and more polarising voices.

Strong demographic faultlines

While national opinion is evenly split, support for this breakthrough varies sharply by age and gender. Younger adults are consistently more open to cultivated meat than older cohorts. Support is strongest among people aged 25 to 44, while opposition rises steadily among those aged 55 and over.

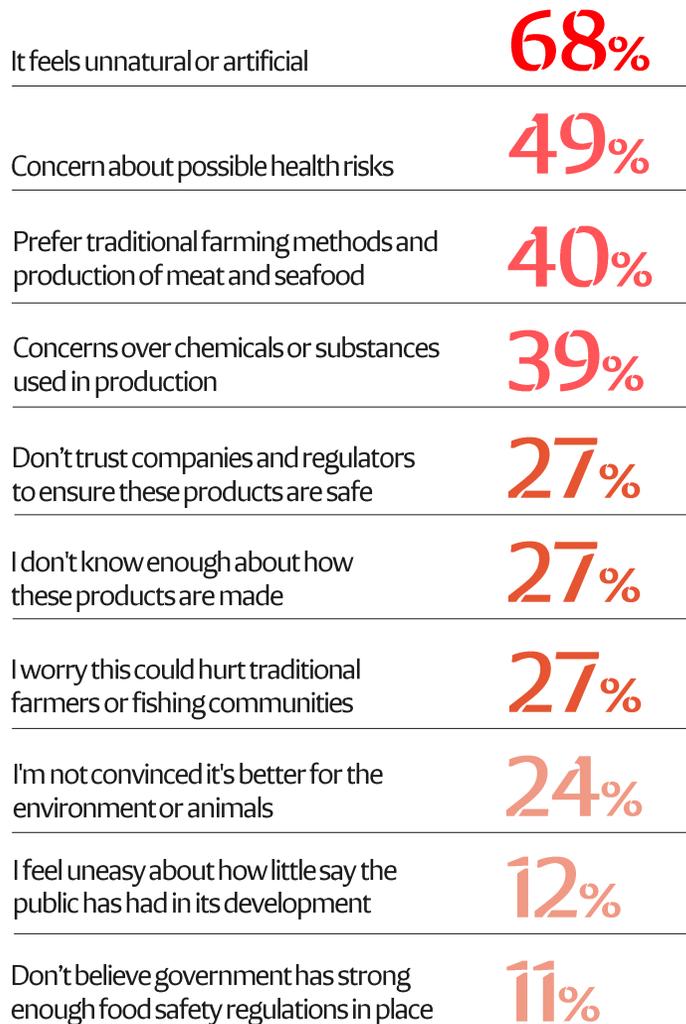
Gender differences are equally pronounced. Men are significantly more supportive of cultivated meat than women, while women are more likely to oppose it or remain uncertain. This matters beyond abstract attitudes. As mentioned earlier, women still play a disproportionate role in household food purchasing and meal planning. Lower confidence among female consumers could have an outsized negative impact on adoption.

A need to segment messaging

Cultivated meat already resonates with some audiences, particularly younger men, but faces greater scepticism among older consumers and women. Understanding why those gaps exist, and what concerns sit behind them, is essential if cultivated meat is to move beyond early adopters and into the mainstream. In the next section we examines those objections in more detail, highlighting the areas where education and messaging will need to focus.



Q: You indicated that you do not support the wider use or development of cultivated meat and seafood in the UK. What best describes your reasons the most, if any?



Among the 657 respondents who stated they do not support the wider use or development of cultivated meat and seafood in the UK, we find a range of objections, both instinctive and rational.

Unfamiliarity with technology

The most common objection is that cultivated meat 'feels unnatural or artificial'. More than two thirds (68%) of opponents select this reason overall, rising to just over 70% among women and broadly consistent across age groups.

Almost 4 in 10 (39%) of opponents worry about chemicals or substances used in production, with women at 41% again more likely to express this concern than men at 34%. This concern rises to almost half (47%) among 35-to-44s. Over a quarter (27%) state they 'do not know enough about how these products are made'. This information gap is cited by 29% of women compared with 22% of men, and rises to over 30% among opponents aged 45 to 54.

Clearly cultivated meat triggers a visceral response. There is also a clear need for better information on the fact that cultivated is 'real meat' and the process and safety measures that exist around how it is grown from animal cells.

Consumer objections to cultivated meat

Is it safe to eat?

Health concerns are a major barrier for this group. Around half of opponents say they worry about possible health risks or long-term effects. These concerns are more pronounced among women at 52%, compared with 45% of men, and remain high across every age group.

We also find a lack of faith in corporates and institutions playing into health concerns. Over 1 in 4 (27%) of opponents say they do not trust companies or regulators to ensure cultivated meat is safe. Public bodies like the Food Standards Authority will need work hard to establish confidence in their approval processes, and in ensuring transparency when it comes to labelling.

Attachment to traditional farming

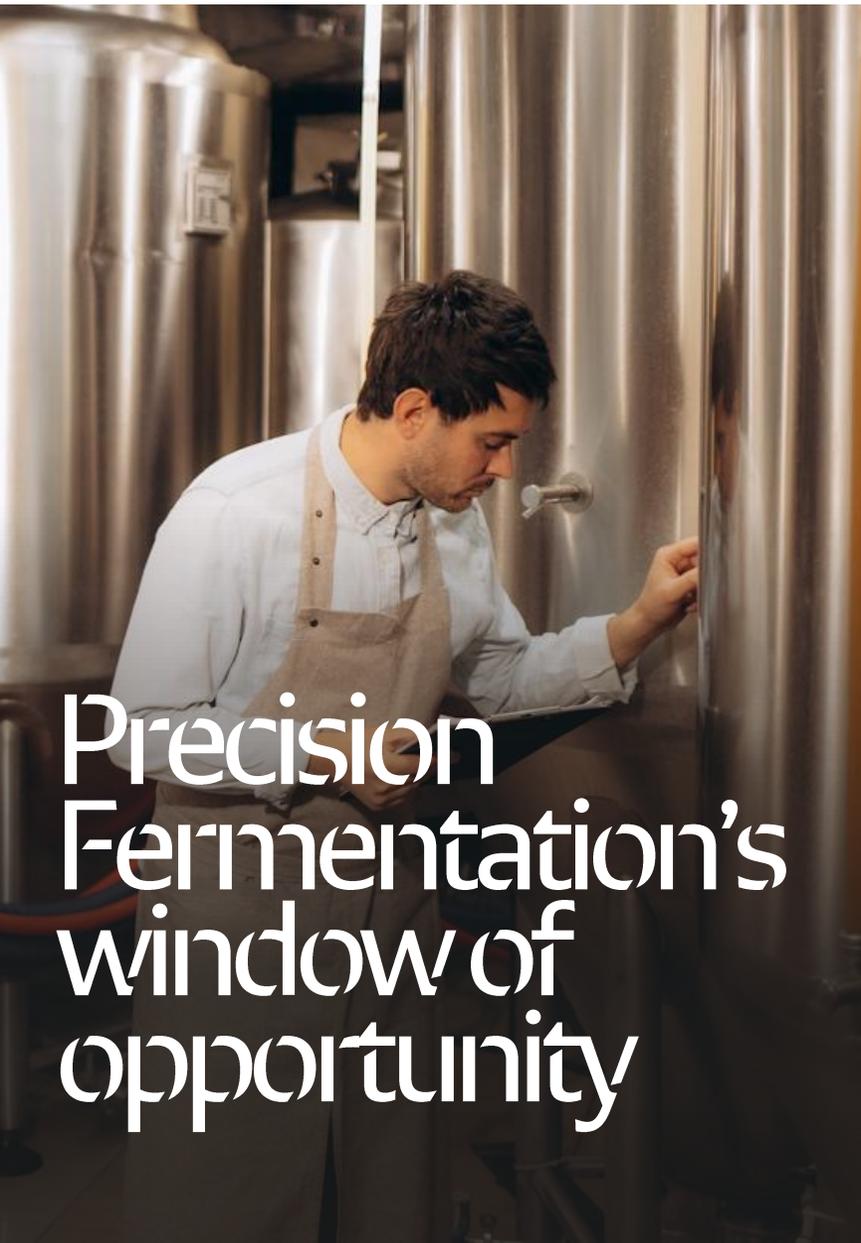
Preferences for existing food systems also feature strongly. Nearly 40% of opponents say they prefer conventional meat farming and production. This rises to 44% among those aged 55 plus, compared with just 25% of 16-to-24s, pointing to a clear generational divide when it comes to views on traditional farming.

Communication priorities

While some opponents may have a strong objection to the concept of cultivated meat that may be difficult to overcome, with others there is room for optimism and space to change minds.

To borrow a metaphor, there has arguably been a broad sector-wide strategy so far to 'not show how the sausages are made,' when it comes to cultivated meat, fearing this would put off consumers. This research indicates that a continuing lack of openness may have the opposite to the intended effect.

Of course, how to tell that 'production' story will need careful consideration. What also emerges is that the job of convincing consumers doesn't rest on producers alone – government and regulators will also need to play an active part in establishing the trust for cultivated meat to succeed.



Precision Fermentation's window of opportunity

Precision Fermentation uses genetically engineered microbes, such as yeast or bacteria, to produce ingredients like cocoa fats, milk proteins, eggs or palm oil in controlled lab or factory settings. These ingredients are usually designed to be used within foods rather than sold as standalone products. Several have already been licensed for sale in markets such as Singapore.

With climate pressures intensifying and traditional agriculture under strain, precision fermentation has emerged as a breakthrough to produce food and food ingredients more efficiently, more sustainably and with greater reliability.

It could be argued that with its focus on producing ingredients, this technology should hide in the background as an anonymous part of the B2B supply chain. That would be unwise. Let's not forget much of the early backlash against GMO resulted from its undeclared use in supermarket products.

Our research finds that Precision Fermentation like Cultivated Meat faces very similar challenges, with a need for openness, education and proactivity if it is to secure broad public support and trust.

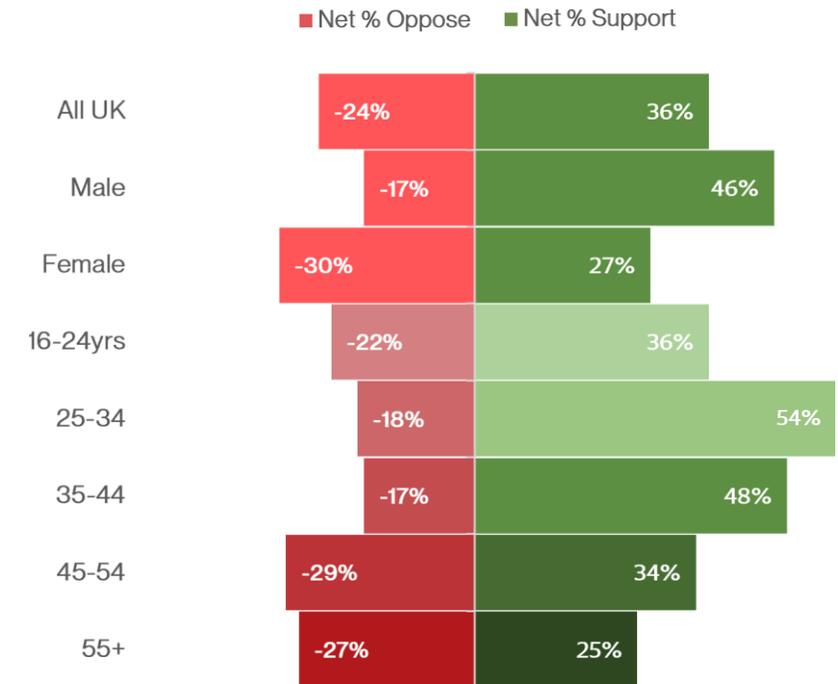
All to play for in winning over UK consumers

Diffusion's research finds that compared to Cultivated Meat, public opinion on Precision Fermentation is starting from a less polarised position. Just over a third of UK consumers (36%) express support for the technology, while just under a quarter (24%) are opposed. That leaves 4 in 10 (40%) who have yet to come to a view.



Q: Based on what you know or have heard, would you generally support or oppose the development and widespread use of Precision Fermentation for food ingredients?

(Definition provided: where genetically engineered microbes (like yeast or bacteria) are used to produce things like milk proteins, eggs, or palm oil in a lab or factory.)





As Ivana Farthing, Science Communication Lead at Diffusion, explains, “We are still in the early days of Precision Fermentation emerging from the lab and into the public consciousness, so it’s no surprise that so many people have yet to make up their minds about this breakthrough. But for researchers and foodtech startups, this consumer ambivalence represents both a risk and an opportunity.”

Diffusion’s research finds support for Precision Fermentation varies sharply by demographic group. Men show strong support at 46%, compared to just 27% support among women.

Age differences are even more pronounced. Support peaks at 54% among 25-to-34s and remains high at 48% among 35-to-44s, before falling to just 25% among those aged 55 and over.

Educate before assumptions set in

“We can see there is a big education and awareness gap that needs to start being filled on the science and methodology of how Precision Fermentation actually works,” Farthing notes. “That includes addressing likely concerns around safety standards, nutritional value and sustainability.”

At the same time, the research suggests Precision Fermentation still benefits from not carrying the cultural baggage attached to earlier food technology debates. Unlike genetically modified crops or Cultivated Meat, it does not seem to be triggering strong visceral reactions. There is plenty of scope to use proactive communication to create a strong foundation of trust for this new method of food manufacture.



Terminology and language will be critical

Terminology and language will be critical to ensuring this comms is effective. Public understanding and acceptance of technologies often depends on how the science is described. “Precision fermentation” or “cell cultured” can sound clinical and technical, when in many cases the underlying technology being used is more akin to brewing. Emphasising how natural techniques and processes are being used will need to be central to how this sector is positioned to the public.

Avoiding the mistakes made by Cultivated Meat

The urgency of doing so is underscored by recent international experience. “We have already Italy and several US states ban the sale of cultivated meat, with some even outlawing further research and development,” Farthing warns. “It’s a lesson that Precision Fermentation needs to heed. New industries that don’t shape the debate risk being shaped by the debate.”

With population growth continuing and climate pressures increasing, Precision Fermentation could play an important role in maintaining an abundant and affordable food supply. Whether it is allowed to do so will depend less on the science itself and more on whether trust and understanding are built early. The window of opportunity to shape the debate won’t be open forever.



5. RADICAL CLIMATE INTERVENTIONS





Will climate innovators be free to think the unthinkable?

Peter Jackson,
Head of Climate &
Cleantech,
Diffusion



When it comes to AI, it's become commonplace for mainstream analysis on tech to take some of the industry's boldest claims at face value. Even some of the most extreme claims of the industry – eliminating all labour income, to take a recent example – are frequently treated as business trends to which society will need to adapt.

Compare and contrast this to how that the impacts of clean technology or the net-zero transition are treated in media. Here, even the gentlest tech innovations are treated as radicalism. Nudging customers towards EVs or heat pumps is not treated as an inevitable tech shift to which we must adapt – it's a radical change that, for much of the UK mainstream media, must be treated with scepticism, or even full-throated opposition.

This changes how climate tech advocates communicate. Rather than pushing bold ideas or paradigm shifts, we look for small, winnable battles in which any suggestion of disruption must be minimised and accounted for in detail; any change proposed must be gradual if clean technology is not to be written off as radical eco-zealotry.

This hides the fact that climate technology needs to discuss some radical concepts and ideas. The damage that we have done to our planet is extreme, and the time for gradualism was decades ago – but the solutions are there.

In this report, we have attempted to map opinions to what we saw as some of the toughest and most potentially controversial topics in climate tech.

Our findings indicate some rich areas for cleantech comms to explore. Why, for example, are men in general more in favour of climate tech fixes than women? Could this provide a wedge to break the link between toxic masculinity and anti-climate behaviour? Why do we see relatively strong support for carbon removal, but deep scepticism about how individual solutions are communicated?

None of the conversations around these topics will be easy. Many of them involve talking about a range of trade offs, and reckoning with the damage people have already done to the planet. Our research shows that overall people are willing to give radical climate ideas a fair hearing.

While media might be sceptical, by better understanding – and trusting – our audiences, there's no reason for climate tech to shy away from the tough conversations we need to have.



Sunlight, science and suspicion...

The communication challenge facing Geoengineering



In April 2025, headlines across UK media proclaimed that the government was preparing to “dim the sun” to fight climate change. The story, based on funding allocated by the UK’s Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA), described early-stage scientific research into solar geoengineering techniques that aim to reflect a small portion of sunlight to cool the planet. While the actual plans were limited to exploratory studies, with no large-scale interventions proposed, the public reaction revealed just how contentious this field has become.

Online, the story was quickly picked up by conspiracy theorists invoking long-standing “chemtrail” narratives, while mainstream outlets often framed the science in stark, even dystopian terms. The episode demonstrated how even research into theoretical climate interventions can trigger significant backlash, shaped by mistrust, misinformation, and fears about humanity overreaching into natural systems.

Why focus on Geoengineering?

What was once seen as far-fetched or fringe science is fast becoming part of mainstream climate discourse. In policy circles, scientific journals, and international forums, geoengineering is no longer a taboo topic, it is being actively explored as a potential part of the global response to climate change. This shift reflects a growing unease: the world is on track to breach the 1.5°C warming threshold far earlier than forecast, and the pace of global decarbonisation is proving too slow to be confident of avoiding climate tipping points.

As such, public and political attention on geoengineering is set to intensify in 2026 and beyond. Whether as a last resort or a necessary complement to emissions reductions, these technologies will likely be part of the climate policy conversation, and understanding public trust, perception, and concern is essential groundwork.

Questions around deploying geoengineering technologies will rightly be complex, spanning governance and accountability, environmental risk, ethics, and equity. But a strong case can be made for the legitimacy and urgency of exploratory research, as supported by ARIA and others. Without research, we cannot fully understand the risks or full potential of these new approaches.

However, the term geoengineering itself is problematic. It is a catch all, encompassing everything from genetically enhancing plants to absorb more CO₂, to placing mirrors in space to reflect sunlight away from the planet. Some techniques build on natural processes, while others rely on advanced engineering.

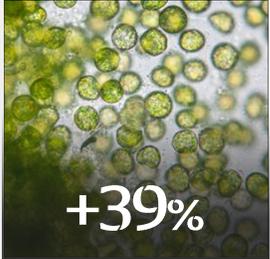
To help better understand public attitudes, Diffusion’s research tested support for the idea of further scientific research across ten different geoengineering concepts. The results are revealing...

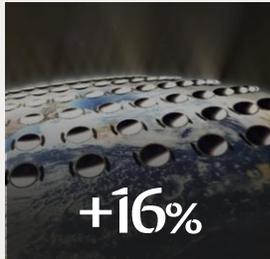


How support for climate mitigation research differs:

Q. To what extent do you support or oppose scientific research into the following climate technologies, which are currently theoretical or in early development:

These results show Net Favourability (net support minus net oppose). A short definition for each technology, as shown below, was provided to respondents.

<p>Arctic Ice Restoration</p>  <p>+44%</p> <p>Techniques to slow the loss of melting Arctic ice, such as covering it with reflective materials or spraying seawater to thicken and refreeze the ice.</p>	<p>Methane Eating Bacteria</p>  <p>+41%</p> <p>Using or enhancing naturally occurring microbes that consume methane (a powerful greenhouse gas) before it escapes into the air from sources like landfill or agriculture.</p>	<p>Ocean Fertilisation</p>  <p>+39%</p> <p>Adding nutrients like iron to parts of the ocean to grow more plankton, which absorb carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the air.</p>	<p>Enhanced Rock Weathering</p>  <p>+37%</p> <p>Spreading crushed rock on land or in the sea to speed up natural processes that remove CO₂ from the atmosphere.</p>	<p>Enhanced Photosynthesis</p>  <p>+33%</p> <p>Genetically modifying or engineering plants, trees, or algae to absorb more CO₂ from the air or water by making their photosynthesis process more efficient.</p>
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<p>Direct Air Capture</p>  <p>+27%</p> <p>Using machines to suck CO₂ out of the atmosphere and store it underground.</p>	<p>Marine Cloud Brightening</p>  <p>+20%</p> <p>Spraying sea salt into low clouds over the ocean to make them brighter and reflect more sunlight away from Earth.</p>	<p>Cloud Seeding</p>  <p>+18%</p> <p>Spraying substances like silver iodide into clouds to encourage rainfall or snow, which could help cool regions or manage drought.</p>	<p>Space-based Reflectors</p>  <p>+16%</p> <p>Placing large mirrors or reflective materials in space to block or deflect a small amount of sunlight before it reaches Earth.</p>	<p>Stratospheric Aerosol Injection</p>  <p>+16%</p> <p>Spraying tiny reflective particles high in the atmosphere to bounce some sunlight back into space.</p>
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‘Geoengineering’ research far from taboo with the British public

What surprised us most from the data was that all ten geoengineering solutions tested achieved positive net favourability, indicating support for further research even into the most controversial approaches. Does this signal a UK public much more open to exploring radical climate solutions than is often assumed?

Possibly, but we should be cautious in interpreting these findings too optimistically. In nearly all cases, around a third of respondents in total said they either did not know, or neither supported nor opposed, research into the geoengineering technique described. That is a significant segment, still in the dark and yet to make up their minds on whether research in this area is a good thing or not.

For most of the public, these technologies remain unfamiliar and complex, and the limited short definitions required by the survey methodology cannot fully reflect their implications or the counter-arguments.

Similarly, a trend not opposing further research, should not be confused with support for real-world geoengineering deployments.

That said, our research highlights meaningful nuance, showing that the UK public differentiates between mitigation approaches, and doesn’t tar them all with the same brush. There is a marked preference for approaches that appear to work with natural systems, compared to those that intervene more directly or ‘mechanically’ in Earth’s processes.

‘Natural’ interventions attract broader support

We find that research into the potential of Arctic ice restoration is the least contentious of the ten options considered with 54% of those surveyed supporting future research, with just 10% opposing. That level of support is broadly consistent across age groups and gender.

The two other approaches that generate majority support for further research are methane eating bacteria (53%) and ocean fertilisation (52%). Opposition to research into these two processes remains low, around 11%, while a quarter of the population sits in the middle, neither supportive nor opposed, with around 10% stating they ‘don’t know’.

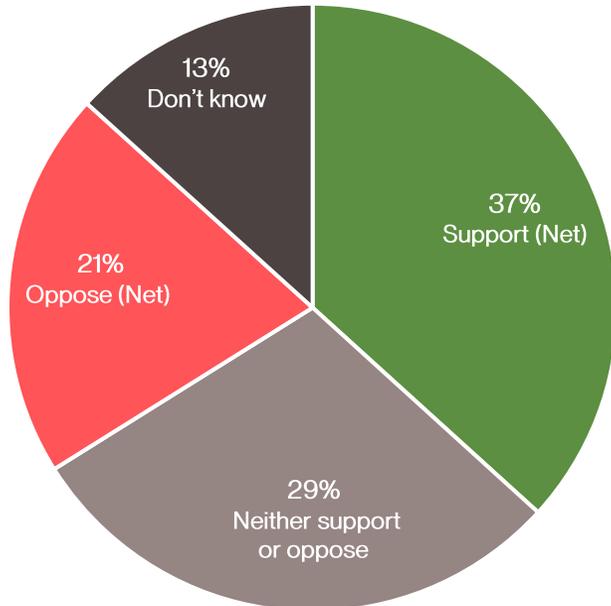
Enhanced rock weathering can also be placed into this group of ‘nature based’ approaches which do not seem to alarm the public. Support for ERW research sits at 48% in support, with 11% against.





Q. To what extent do you support or oppose scientific research into the following climate technologies, which are currently theoretical or in early development:

STRATOSPHERIC AEROSOL INJECTION



Definition provided: Spraying tiny reflective particles high in the atmosphere to bounce some sunlight back into space and cool the planet.



We find that direct air carbon capture (DAC) occupies a middle ground, 43% support research, while 16% oppose it. Support is highest among men (50%) vs 36% among women.

Across most of the ten geoengineering technologies in the survey, we consistently find between a quarter and a third of the public have not yet formed a view.

Atmospheric interventions trigger greater caution

Support becomes more fragile when geoengineering moves directly into the atmosphere. Research into stratospheric aerosol injection, marine cloud brightening, and space-based reflectors attracts net support only in the high 30s, alongside higher opposition and larger undecided groups.

For instance, with research into the use of space-based reflectors, we find 37% support, 21% opposed, 29% neither support or oppose, and 14% state they 'don't know'.

Significant demographic differences

Across all ten geoengineering and climate technologies we tested, a clear and consistent gender pattern emerges. Men are more supportive and less opposed than women of every intervention, whether nature based or more interventionist. We find male support sits between 5 and 16 percentage points higher than female support.

Looking at the differences by age, support is strongest among 25-to-34s, who are consistently the most open to further geoengineering research across nearly all the mitigation options tested. Younger adults aged 16-to-24 and older adults aged 55 plus are more cautious, with higher levels of neutrality and uncertainty.

A focus on differentiation

So, what are some of the implications for those advocating for greater consideration and funding for climate mitigation? For the moment at least, 'geoengineering' is the umbrella term the media has settled on for this area. Trying too forcefully to dislodge terminology can sometimes be a wasted PR effort.

Even the use of narrower terms like Solar Radiation Management (SRM) currently gaining traction, may prove too broad given the significant differences between say, marine cloud brightening and space-based reflectors.

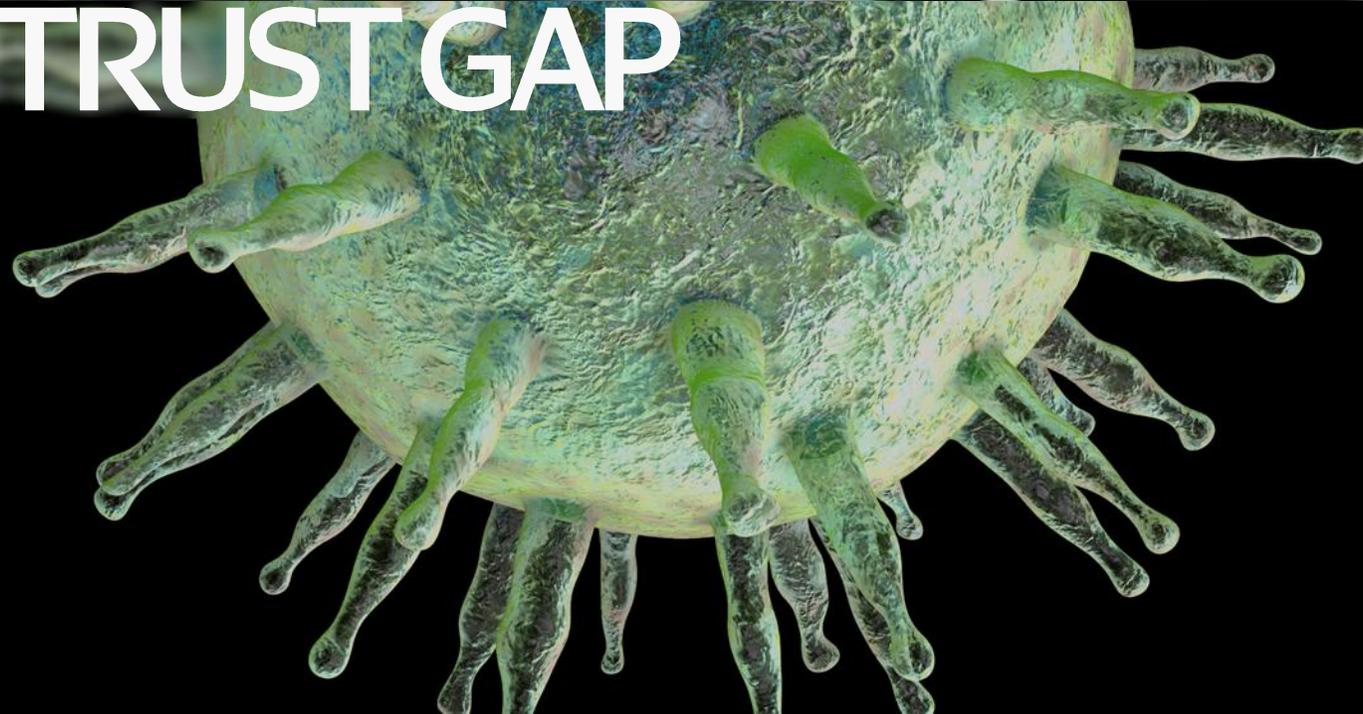
What could have greater impact for researchers and innovators is instead defining and explaining their own specific solutions. This will allow them to be considered more fairly on their own merits against a specific rather than generic risk profile.

The findings indicate that attitudes to geoengineering remain fluid and uneven across generations and genders. Building effective communications strategies will require deeper research and qualitative testing to understand how different audiences perceive risks, trade-offs, safeguards, and react to the language of geoengineering.

Despite the shrill headlines and social media commentary, Diffusion's research shows there is still space for persuasion, what is probably in much shorter supply is time.



6. CLOSING THE COMMS TRUST GAP





The seven 'New Rules' of science communication in the age of conspiracy.

Taken together, Diffusion's research provides clear, practical lessons for organisations seeking to build and protect public trust in scientific research and novel solutions in an increasingly sceptical media environment.

Silence cedes space for 'alternative facts'

Timing has become an even more critical factor when it comes to trust in new science. Early voices carry disproportionate weight and usually set the terms of the debate! Securing trust in new breakthroughs today means starting conversations with the media, the public, and stakeholders sooner than would traditionally feel comfortable.

That can be easier said than done. The Achilles' heel of science communication is too often allowing the 'perfect to be the enemy of the good'. Waiting until every supporting research paper has been published, funding has been secured, or a pilot successfully completed, before embarking on PR may feel like best-practice, but in the age of conspiracy, the calculus has changed.

An abundance of caution means increasing the risk of ceding control of the narrative to detractors. In the absence of clear, credible explanation and a proactive programme of education, knowledge vacuums can be filled by speculation or misinformation.

If individual innovators really are too nascent to tackle comms individually, this is where coming together to start 'category level' comms early, under a common banner, will become a greater priority.

Public opinion is not a monolith

As we've discovered, when we look more closely at attitudes to emerging science, overall population-level data only tells half the story. Beneath the headline figures we find significant differences in trust, awareness and acceptance, across gender, age, social class and other segments.

When these differences are coupled with a fragmented media landscape, the outreach challenge becomes more complex. Specific groups increasingly encounter science through different channels and formats, and via different voices.

This makes a traditional 'one-size-fits-all' approach to positioning and media messaging redundant. More time and investment now needs to be spent segmenting, profiling and surveying audiences and developing tailored sets of arguments and messages designed to have the best chance of connecting and persuading.

In this report we consistently find a 'Persuadable Middle', a critical group where positions around new science have yet to solidify. This is where taking a more targeted, insight-led communication approach really has the potential to shift the balance of mainstream opinion.

Risk needs better context and explanation

We should not underestimate the sophistication of mainstream audiences when it comes to hearing scientific arguments. The UK public feels they are not always getting the full story. There is a clear appetite for more balanced reporting and debate on trade-offs, uncertainty, and longer-term implications of new science.

As a result, overclaiming, or skating past wider impacts, is now even more likely to provoke scepticism and doubt. But this need for more open and nuanced communication going forward, also presents a challenge. We know many detractors love to cherry-pick negative data, quotes, or interview snippets to fuel confusion and disinformation, particularly online. That will need careful monitoring.

Science rarely deals in absolutes, yet the way risk is quantified and compared by scientists and institutions is often unclear and unimaginative. If we want people to weigh up the benefits and downsides of new solutions with greater confidence, we also need to invest more time in developing relatable comparisons and scenarios, that use accessible language to explain the risks of both action and inaction.



Capture attention first, then build depth

One of the clearest signals from this research is that people want science to show up in more accessible, visual ways. Short videos, strong imagery and simple explainers are no longer optional, particularly as younger audiences spend more of their time on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. The same applies just as much for time-poor B2B and investor audiences as well.

As an added benefit, in our experience, creating something like a two-minute explainer video is one of the most valuable communication exercises a leadership team can go through. It forces difficult but necessary decisions about what really matters, what details can come later, and how to communicate clearly and simply within the limited time and attention span of the average person.

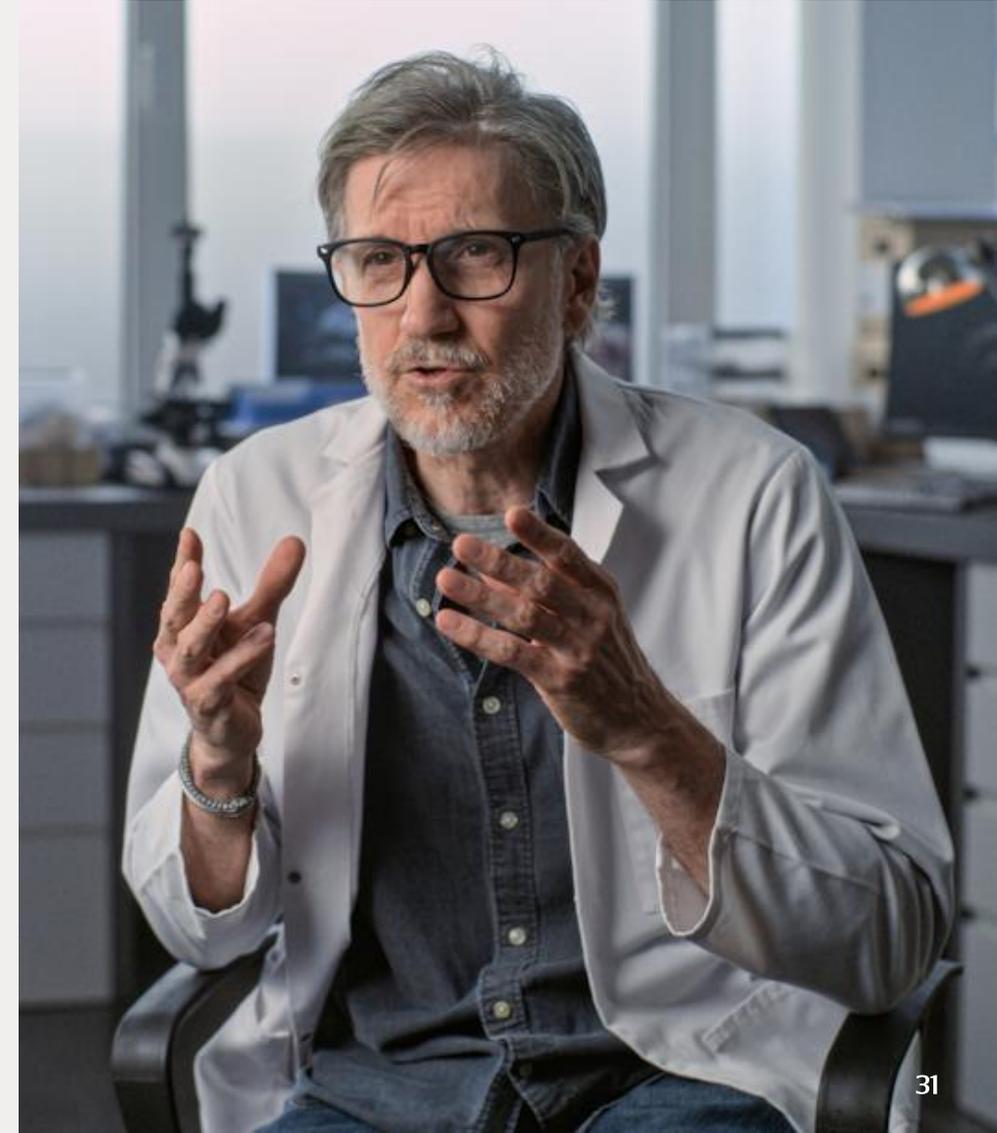
Science communication needs to be layered, each piece of content shouldn't be attempting to tell the entire story. Different formats need to play different roles. A short video can open the door, a visual can clarify the core idea, and longer form written content and articles can provide depth for those who want it.

Mainstream media still matters, segmentation matters more

Despite growing fragmentation, traditional and top-tier media outlets continue to play a critical role in science communication. They still offer audience trust, third-party endorsement, and reach at scale. For emerging science, appearing in established B2B trade, national and broadcast media provides reassurance that claims have been scrutinised, not simply promoted.

At the same time, no single outlet reaches everyone. Different audiences trust different titles, platforms, and journalists, which makes media segmentation as important as blunt reach figures. Effective media relations strategies recognise the importance of this mix, and the role different outlets can play in laying the foundations of trust.

Doing this effectively also requires an investment of time from scientists and CEOs, to 'roll the pitch' ahead of major announcements and bring reporters, analysts and influencers fully up to speed on new areas of science and technology.





Harness independent experts and influencers

Trust in a new discovery rarely comes from a single source. Our research and experience consistently show that public confidence grows when official information and company spokespeople are supported by independent experts.

Hearing claims and evidence reinforced by credible third parties helps people feel reassured, particularly when a technology is unfamiliar, complex, or already contested in public debate and an organisation is new or is starting comms from a low public profile.

It would be wrong to view this tactic as simply buying support or borrowing credibility. Its real purpose is building strategic, transparent relationships with experts over the long-term that also help secure media trust and interest.

Independent scientists, clinicians, academics, NGOs, and policy specialists can all strengthen a communications platform. In some contexts, the likes of parenting influencers, or community leaders, may be able to help reach audiences identified as having specific concerns.

Actively building a deeper bench of spokespeople can not only strengthen your message, but open-up additional media categories and content opportunities to influence a broader range of stakeholders.

Invest in creating movements, not moments

Finally, no matter how exciting a new discovery may be, a one-and-done approach to science communication has never been enough and is even less effective today. We are no longer operating in a monoculture, and even the most popular media outlets or social platforms cannot reach everyone who matters.

Attention is fragmented, trust builds slowly, and most audiences need to encounter new ideas multiple times before they begin to feel familiar or credible. As a result, science communication is shifting away from isolated launches and occasional press release, and toward a steady, sustained presence across owned, earned, and social channels.

At Diffusion, we are also increasingly focused on helping our science-led clients to use marketing and comms to build movements. That involves addressing key stakeholder groups in the right sequence and attracting credible advocates and organisations as partners. Taking on the status quo requires strength in numbers!

By treating communication as a long-term endeavour rather than a single campaign, science innovators can create familiarity and build durable trust, so their breakthroughs can successfully break through the barriers!

Let's continue the conversation...

Scientists are today's rock stars, tackling the world's most consequential and existential challenges. But for science to change the world, it needs more than data. It needs visibility, empathy, and financial backing.

At Diffusion, we help scientists, engineers, and science-tech founders turn complex ideas into compelling stories that cut through.

Our international team of science-literate communicators blends insights-driven strategy with bold, people-centric campaigns. We view communication as a catalyst. One that can help you influence investors, policymakers, customers, and global audiences to secure the funding, talent, and understanding you need for your ideas to succeed.

Please drop our Science & Innovation Practice lead, Ivana Farthing a line at ivana.farthing@diffusionpr.com and learn more about our clients and approach at: diffusionpr.com.

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