



#IEE60

CARTE BLANCHE

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En 2024, l'Institut d'études européennes de l'ULB (IEE-ULB) a soixante ans ! Pour scander cette année anniversaire et très « européenne », il convie ses membres à réfléchir à des questions fondatrices de l'intégration européenne en 1964 et toujours d'actualité en 2024. Dans une forme courte et accessible, nos chercheurs proposent un portrait en mosaïque de l'Europe, entre continuités et mutations. Les auteurs sont libres de leurs propos qui ne représentent pas une position officielle de l'IEE-ULB.

Rethinking the role of expertise in the European Union

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The article calls for reimagining the role of expertise in the EU, highlighting the dual anxiety over democratic deficit and technocratic outreach. It proposes legitimizing expertise by facilitating democratic input in technocratic policymaking.

L'article préconise la réinvention du rôle de l'expertise dans l'UE, soulignant la préoccupation liée à la fois au déficit démocratique et à la portée technocratique. L'auteur propose de légitimer l'expertise en facilitant la participation démocratique dans l'élaboration des politiques.

The technocratic structure of the European Union has long sparked dissensus. We can trace concerns over the EU's technocratic outreach to the Maastricht Treaty, which laid the ground for establishing the single currency and European Central Bank (ECB). In the wake of the European Debt Crisis, the criticism intensified, with the 'troika' intervening in the internal politics of 'rescued' states. Beyond triggering the wave of anti-austerity protests in Southern Europe, the handling of the crisis sparked a reflection within the EU itself. Tellingly, such prominent figures as then president of the European Parliament, [Martin Schulz](#), called for strengthening the democratic foundation of the Union.

Since citizens exercise limited agency in shaping the composition of the ECB or European Commission (EC), the 'enlightened understanding' emerges as the cornerstone of the European project. The concept captures an ideal of equal and ample access to public information granted to all citizens. Ideally, this set-up enables a 'permissive consensus' in which citizens assent to European integration with the scope of contestation ceasing to threaten the existence of the Union. Within this scope, the EU encourages citizens to participate via public engagement initiatives that combine explanations of the intricate workings of the EU with calls for participating in the European elections.

Although the technocratic outreach continues to spark concern, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, not enough expertise began to feel like a greater danger than too much of it. While the European Debt Crisis challenged the power of unelected bodies, the COVID-19 crisis showed their weakness. With the mounting contestation of public health guidelines, the EU realized that misinformation and belief in conspiracies is no longer a quirk on the outskirts of social life but a life and death issue. Closed in their homes, people desperately sought explanations for why their lives got disrupted, often reaching conclusions defying the scientific consensus. The EU responded by reiterating the authority of expert-based policy-making bodies fearing the intensifying [infodemic](#).



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Indeed, simultaneous fears of the demise and supremacy of expertise signal confusion over the role of knowledge in democratic politics. The polarizing figure of an 'expert' encapsulates the discussion about the status of specialized knowledge. It entails both the promise of good governance and the danger of subjugating our democratic life to unelected bodies.

As the factual foundation of governance becomes increasingly challenged by conspiracy theories and disinformation, a concern over deficiency of expertise trumps concerns over its dangers. However, the contestation of established 'facts' wildly differs in merit, ranging from well-documented gender bias in clinical medicine to preposterous racial theories. How should the EU react to this erosion of the factual grounds of public debate?

So far, the EC focused on tackling disinformation online. With kickstarting the [#FactsMatter](#) campaign, EC outlined fact-checking guidelines for social media companies. Moreover, the newly found European Digital Media Observatory ([EDMO](#)) provides for an unprecedented cooperation of academics and fact-checkers to understand the patterns and causes of disinformation online. These efforts constitute a much-needed step in understanding and regulating the online sphere.

Nevertheless, reducing the problem to misinformation neglects its political nature. After all, for fact-checking to work, we need the recipient to recognize the legitimacy of the established bodies to produce facts. While debunking falsehoods surrounding COVID-19 constitutes a valuable intervention, it will not alter the minds of those already convinced about the harmfulness of vaccines. Indeed, once self-sealing conspiracist reasoning enters the picture, any corrections might exert an adverse effect by serving as proof of a grand conspiracy.

To address this, we need to rethink the role of expertise in EU governance. Ideally, it would entail an approach that combines an appreciation of the role of experts in navigating complex tasks while offering regulated channels to contest it. After all, we would want public health measures to be decided neither by unaccountable experts nor by a social media poll. The question is: how do we arrive at specialized knowledge rooted in democratic assent?

According to Alfred Moore, the answer to this question is [critical elitism](#). The author points out how opening expert communities to public scrutiny might entrench their legitimacy. COVID-19 laid bare that the current mode of public health communication is misguided. Arguably, in their calls to unflinchingly 'follow the science', authorities eroded its legitimacy. Although communicating each scientific development with certainty might have seemed like a good idea, it made it difficult to pivot once the guidelines had changed. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine a different reaction given the limited discussion on practices of knowledge production. Without this debate, a distinction between responsible and irrational citizens prevailed, effectively deepening the disagreement over basic facts.

Instead, the EU needs to rethink how it utilizes expertise in policymaking. Most importantly, experts need to be open to include non-expert stakeholders. Even if the concerns of a group are not grounded in scientific consensus, they should be addressed. The same goes for the communication of public health matters. One does not need to be an expert to ask poignant questions about the impact of scientific innovations on their community.

Although the task may seem daunting, the cost of not acting is too great. The current trajectory leads to the deepening epistemic divide that will hinder European integration and quality of governance. The legitimacy of experts will stem from political discussion, or it will be no more.

