

25th September 2023 by Giorgio Parisi

5 Last year, as the number of Italians getting a fourth booster dose of the Covid vaccine waned, the country's ministry of health asked me, as a scientist, to appear on a 50-second TV spot, explaining why vulnerable people should get another jab. It was aired hundreds of times on television. As a result, I received a lot of emails attacking me; on Twitter and Facebook I was (wrongly) denounced as someone in the pocket of big pharma.

10 At the height of the pandemic in October 2020 I'd had a similar experience. At the time, I was president of the Accademia dei Lincei, Italy's most important scientific academy, and the second deadly wave of Covid was arriving. I argued in a long and reasoned article, highlighting the epidemiological situation in detail, that either drastic measures would need to be taken immediately or 500 deaths a day could be expected by mid-November (unfortunately the
15 prediction was accurate). Immediately after publication, I received emails telling me in the strongest of terms that I had better not get involved in other people's business.

20 These episodes made me experience first-hand a phenomenon that I was becoming increasingly familiar with: the vanishing of confidence in science. It seems almost a paradox: as our societies become more and more dependent on advanced technology based on scientific discoveries, people are becoming more and more suspicious of scientists.

How can we make sense of this? There are many factors to consider. I often think about the decreasing importance of the printed word, over the past decades, in favour of visual and hyper-concise forms of media, from TV to TikTok. Televised debates require fast reaction times, whereas scientists are used to studying issues at length and only talking about them after
25 thinking. In addition, a successful visual performance is not just about being correct but evoking sympathy in the viewer – about performing. This doesn't always come easy to scientists.

30 But perhaps the current difficulties have deeper origins. We are entering a period of pessimism about the future that has its origin in crises of various kinds: economic, climate-related, resource depletion. Many countries are experiencing rising inequality, job insecurity, unemployment and outright war.

Whereas once it was thought that the future would necessarily be better than the present, faith in progress – in the magnificent and progressive fortunes of humans – has been eroded. Many fear, with good reason, that future generations will be worse off than the present ones. And just as science used to get the credit for progress, so now it receives the blame for decline (real or
35 just perceived, it doesn't matter). Science is sometimes felt to be a bad teacher who has led us in the wrong direction, and changing this perception is not easy.

(Adapted from the Guardian 477 words)