Erasmus School of
Health Policy
& Management

Trust beyond evidence

Affective Dynamics at the Science-Policy Nexus

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Paradox of Scientific Authority

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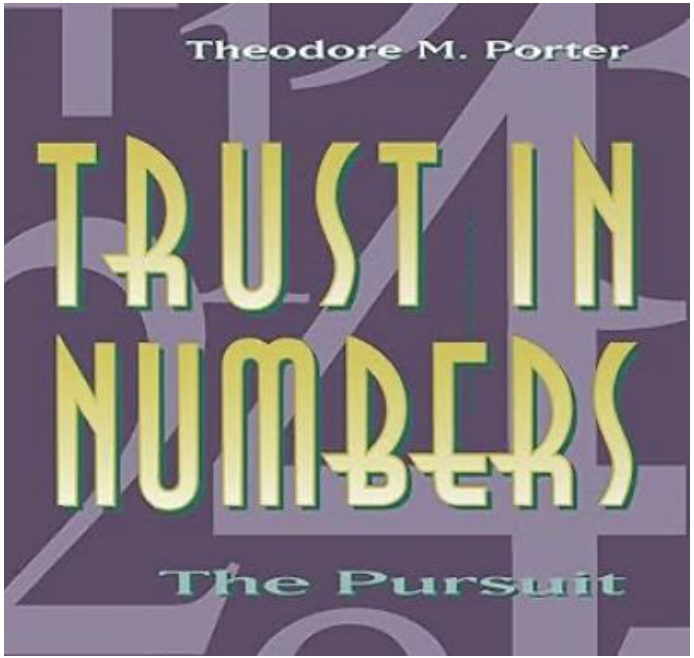
Why the focus on evidence?

“Scientific objectivity provides an answer to a moral demand for impartiality and fairness.

A decision made by the **numbers** … has at least the appearance of being fair and impersonal”

Porter, 1995, p. 8



Risks

When societal issues become “technical problems”

- Issues shift to expert domain and move outside public reach
- Moral and political questions are reduced to technical ones
- Citizens easily feel unheard and poorly represented

(Fischer, 202; Sandel, 2020; Callon et al., 2011)

Effect → growing sense of public disempowerment

Ethnographic research at the science-policy nexus

Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu
Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport

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Experts trust beyond evidence

source: TROUW

Experts use emotion/affect to judge evidence

"I lean toward cancelling Carnaval"

"That surprises me"

"these data make me really uncomfortable"

“there was a **sense of urgency** in the [biomedical] committee… that is **necessary information for me**, but it is not something that will appear in a fact sheet.”

Member socio-economic advice committee

“we think very differently from you”

“we have to explain things o**ver and over again**” … “it takes a disproportionate amount of **time**”… “we are in a crisis”

Member socio-economic advice committee

Evidence does not ”speak for itself” – it involves affective interpretation

→**Experts rely on feelings** of urgency, surprise, inclination/hesitancy, discomfort, resonance, frustration and irritation

→what counts as *credible evidence* is the result of a cognitive process as well as an **affective and embodied process**

→ Trust between experts depends not only on the exchange of evidence, but on their capacity to interpret, respond and “feel their way” under uncertainty.

Experts trust beyond evidence

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25 years of deliberation between citizens, scientists, policymakers, and industry

Decision-making in the Netherlands:

- Consensus-based (polder model)
- Technocratic

Rollout of mobile technology continued

“I am a policy officer. What I focus on is: what is the **scientific consensus**?”

“… I have spent so much time going through the **scientific literature**…and gov documents We have gathered a lot of knowledge.”

“**No proven health effects** have been found … there is this nagging thought: what if 5G does turn out to be harmful… the consequences would be enormous.”

Focus on evidence resulted in:

Epistemic arms race between experts and citizens

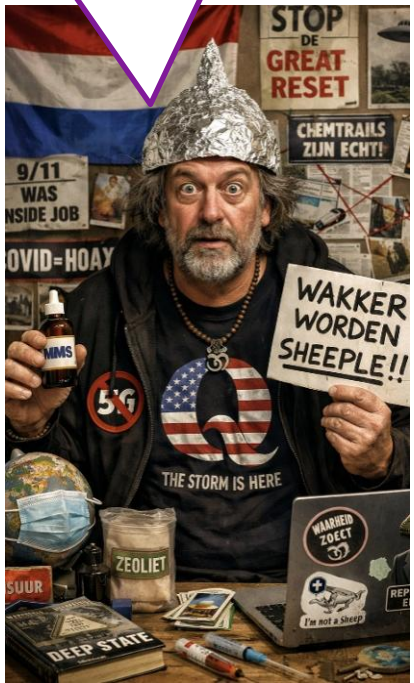
Growing feelings of powerlessness, misrecognition and frustration

Alienation, escalating distrust and labelling ‘conspiracy theorist’ ‘murderer’ or ‘deep state’

”There is now growing doubt about the integrity of policy officials… we are not trusted from the outset”

“I have personally experienced an increase in fear… particularly fear of verbal attacks”

“I felt deceived… I was given a chance to speak, but then I was just brushed off as a ‘conspiracy theorist”



Lessons from 5G debate

→ Distrust is not a property of a particular social group (“conspiracy theorists” “loonies”) but it is a **relational phenomenon**

→Feelings of being **misrecognized** are a better **indicator** of **escalating distrust** than the extent to which knowledge has been transferred and/or risks have been adequately communicated.

Controversies over vaccination, 5G, pesticides, or wind turbines, are not only about facts and procedures, but about **recognition**, **respect**, and who is **acknowledged as a credible** participant in knowledge-making and decision-making.

Concluding remarks

Breaking two assumptions in the science-policy nexus:

1) **Beyond the deficit model**
   →“enlightening” the public with more/better evidence does not build trust
   → recognition and affective dynamics can build and break trust

2) **Breaking the stereotypes**
   → Stereotypes of "detached" and “rational” scientists, and “emotional” and “irrational” citizens do not hold, and are damaging.