Policy, Expertise, and Trust in Action

Reporting

Project Information

PERITIA
Grant agreement ID: 870883

DOI
10.3030/870883

Funded under
SOCIETAL CHALLENGES - Europe In A Changing World - Inclusive, Innovative And Reflective Societies

Total cost
€ 2 994 596,25

EU contribution
€ 2 994 596,25

Coordinated by
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, DUBLIN, Ireland

Closed project

EC signature date
13 November 2019

Start date
1 February 2020

End date
31 May 2023

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Experts and our reliance on them are inescapable features of modern life. We lead a life that is dependent on expert knowledge and we seldom show any hesitation to rely on, and indeed to put trust in, their presumed superior knowledge. What goes for our personal lives is even more pronounced in the public sphere. To do their job well, policy makers have to rely on specialised knowledge, good data and well-informed projections. Reliable information is the currency that makes the wheels of policymaking turn smoothly and experts are the source of such information. This is where the question of trust comes in. Experts are not univocal, nor do they come with a seal of reliability inscribed on their persons. And yet, effective governance, particularly in democratic systems, is not possible in the absence of at least some level of trust in experts and the policy measures they recommend. Whether such trust is warranted and how it can be retained have become burning issues of our time.

PEriTiA brings together philosophers, social and natural scientists, policy experts, ethicists, psychologists, media specialists and civil society organisations in an attempt to address the complex issues of trust in and the trustworthiness of the experts’ roles in policy decisions. The project aims to throw light on the conditions where the general public can and should place trust in experts and the policies resulting from their advice. A better understanding of the conditions of warranted trust in experts, in turn, should help us to address breakdowns in such trust.

What is the problem/issue being addressed?

The topics of trust and expertise have become prominent, indeed commonplace, in public and political discourse. Complex and difficult questions underlie the topics: How are we to identify genuine experts? Which of the many different claims to expertise should the general public, and policy makers, accept? How do we weigh the costs and benefits of expert advice and how far should the public and policy makers go in implementing their recommendations? How can we find a balance between conflicting demands of differing social goods and priorities? What ethical duties do experts have? What role does
the media - traditional and social - play in representing, amplifying or distorting expert views? What is the empirical evidence for the alleged breakdown of trust in experts? Are the levels of trust in experts constant across different societies and socio-economic conditions?

Debates on these questions are currently being played out publicly in the social and political spheres and over issues that are literally matters of life and death. The result is often acrimony and partisanship rather than measured discourse. PErTiA addresses the central questions of trust in experts through an in depth multidisciplinary investigation of the requirements of genuine expertise and the conditions for the trustworthiness of experts and their advice.

Why is it important for society?

Trust in policy measures informed by scientific advice is essential for their implementation. Populist politicians, with their anti-elitist rhetoric, have questioned both the trustworthiness of the experts and the legitimacy of various domains of expertise. The project had from the outset sought to be relevant to pressing social and political issues by focusing trust in climate science as its core test-case. What was unexpected and showed, in even starker terms, the urgency of this project was the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic. More than ever, we can now see the significance of the role of experts in policy decisions and the centrality of the question of trust in expert advice, both on the part of policy makers and the general public. To respond to the urgency of the issue, the project, in addition to its continued use of trust in climate science as a test case, has taken on some additional research tasks specifically related to Covid 19. The results of these activities are made available to the public through the project webpage.

What are the overall objectives?

The project is carried out in three phases, the first two - theoretical followed by empirical - aim to clarify the nature and conditions of trust, distrust and trustworthiness of expert opinion. In the process, we aim to achieve a better understanding of the social, psychological and ethical dimensions of trust. We also focus on the role of traditional and social media in propagating genuine information as well as in spreading falsehoods and disinformation on scientific matters.

The empirical phase of the project relies on a survey of attitudes of trust in a number of countries as well as on data from behavioural experiments to better understand the extent and conditions of trust and distrust in experts. A key hypothesis, explored conceptually and tested empirically, is that both emotions and value judgements play central roles in our attitudes of trust and distrust, and that experts and policy makers ignore these factors at their, and our, peril.

The final stage - the ‘ameliorative phase’ of the project, specifically counters possible breakdowns of trust between experts, policy makers and the general public by hosting mini-publics – forums for face to face discussions between them. The underlying thought is that structured but open discussions between experts and non-experts will enhance mutual understanding and hence trust.

The final aim of the project is to use its theoretical, empirical and practical findings to design a tool kit
of the indicators of trust to be used to gauge the trustworthiness of expert advice in social and political decision making.

Work performed from the beginning of the project to the end of the period covered by the report and main results achieved so far

The project, despite the constraints on its activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has achieved the goals envisaged for this initial period. Eight highly accomplished researchers joined various working groups of the project and have been actively contributing to its research and outreach activities. The project has held one in person symposium - on Trust in a Changing World - and an online workshop on the Social Indicators of Trust in Experts. Work on holding a major online conference, on Trust in a Changing Media Landscape, has also been completed. Two academic articles by members of the consortium as well as a journal special issue on the topic of Vulnerability and Trust have been published. The project has also published a number of newspaper and social media pieces and interviews and has held online discussion panels. These research and outreach activities have helped PERITIA to achieve its goal of strengthening the theoretical and empirical knowledge-base on trust and in transmitting this knowledge both to specialists and the general public.

Progress beyond the state of the art and expected potential impact (including the socio-economic impact and the wider societal implications of the project so far)

PERITIA is the first large-scale multidisciplinary project of its kind to bring together philosophical and empirical approaches to the topic of trust and expertise. The theoretical results of this approach, achieved through its numerous publications, by virtue of this innovative design, will go beyond the state of art. The major expected societal impact of the project is its influence on strengthening trust, where warranted, in policy measures that are informed by reliable expert advice.

Last update: 11 June 2021