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**Social construction of trust in scientific expertise and traditional media in a changing  
media landscape: emphasis on shark risk in Reunion Island**

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## **The “shark crisis” in Reunion island, conflict elements**

Reunion island is a French territory situated in the southwest of the Indian ocean and exposed to many natural hazards. Since 2011, the risk of shark attacks risk took an important place in the political management of the island’s natural risks (Taglioni & Guiltat, 2015). Between February and September 2011, four attacks occurred. The one in September fatally involved a bodyboarder and marked the beginning of what became known as the “shark crisis”, as qualified by the media (Lemahieu et al., 2017). Human-shark interactions with fatal shark attacks were already listed in Reunion Island, but the local media coverage has not been as present as since 2011. Moreover, the public policies hadn’t taken into account specific measures for risk management. The Reunion region, supported by the French State and Europe, commissioned in October 2011 a scientific expertise to the Research Institute for Development (IRD), to establish a knowledge set on the ecology of the two sharks species involved in the attacks (tiger and bull sharks)(Soria et al., 2015). The research program was completed in April 2015. Quickly, scientific, politic and media temporalities came into conflict. The expertise is judged as too long for many sea users to answer to their needs of securing and they began to be suspicious about the goals of the experts by accusing them of a lack of objectivity and sincerity, based on their risk management measures aimed at human-shark cohabitation and not shark fishing to protect human water activities. The loss of trust in experts led to a delegitimization process against them and brought back into question their legitimacy as participants to the risk management (Thiann-Bo Morel, 2019). In parallel, the local mediatization of the shark risk management would have participate to raise up different issues linked to the statute of experts and its legitimacy. Local journalists have been accused to “give voice to everybody” and allowed to some parties to appropriate them the expertise to the detriment of experts (Jaccoud, 2014). The representations about the involvement of the local media in the evolution of the perception of the legitimacy of experts raise up questions about communicational phenomena studies, that conducted us to adopt a communicational approach of the controversies focused on the way that the parties give meaning about what they discuss, and not only focused on the different strategies they adopt to advance their interest (Badouard & Mabi, 2015).

## **Scientific research and journalism in the era of instantaneity**

In France, we respond to the threat of risks by prioritizing the creation of expert committees that implement scientific expertise at the heart of the political decision-making process, which constitute a technocratic risk management French model (Granjou, 2003). Even if environmental risk management skills were transmitted in part from the central French State to its local authorities, it keeps controlling it through its regional structures, including scientific committees, but also through the Prefects of its departments. Trust in experts and authorities to manage risks has been impacted by health scandals, experts' words minimizing the consequences of a risk or guided by ideologies or lobbies (Le Breton, 2012; Montpetit, 2003). This loss of trust in institutions led to the constitution of citizen counter-expertise (Beck, 2001; Lochard & Simonet, 2009; Siméant, 2002). Also, mediatization of scientific discourses participated to the construction of environmental risk as social and politic problem (Beck, 2001). Science and media became the first co-builders of environmental risk (Allan et al., 2000). Interactions between scientific and journalistic fields constitute a point of view in analyzing the representations of legitimacies of experts. Studies showed tensions relating in particular to the confrontation of professional logics, integrating values specific to each of these spheres (Bourdieu, 1996; Weingart, 1998). Moreover, the arrival of Internet adds another component to this relationship, disrupting the journalistic practices by adapting them to the instantaneity of information, modifying their report to time, developing digital skills or new editorial strategies (Charon, 2010) in an information society that questions the role of the media as trusted device supporting the modern democracies (Quéré, 2005). On the other hand, Internet raised up issues for scientific research linked to an easier access for publics to information, opinion and debate resources (Hansen, 2009) which can be used in the set-up of legitimization strategy of pressure groups. To better understand the social construction of trust in scientific expertise and traditional media at the prism of the challenges of Internet but also the interactions between parties in a defined context, we interviewed six local journalists from local online press, seven scientists from French institutes involved in the expertise and one sea user member of a local sea users' association. We chose to focus our analysis of their discourses considering two points. The first one will explore how journalists and experts think that Internet challenges the professional journalistic practices on one side, and the scientific credibility on the other side, and contribute to the evolution of their legitimacy and trust placed in them. But even if Internet can alter the communicational practices and create an acceleration of the information flow, it does not transform deeply the human relationship. So, we will focus on a second point

on how the interactions between journalists, experts and sea users can establish trust criteria based on the social contract representations of the experts and the sharing of common values.

### **Information overload as an issue for trust, credibility and legitimacy**

The instantaneity of information permitted by Internet, according to local journalists, lead them to adapt their practices to stay competitive despite the free online press business model adopted to face to the flow of information, and keep their legitimacy as information producers. The first consequence would be to adapt their productions format to the span attention of their readership that they imagine decreasing because of the information overload on Internet. They privileged the production of several short contents, following criteria of simplicity and readability. The second consequence would be to face to budgetary constraints, where some local media companies have to reduce their staff. This decreasing of the number of journalists in the newsroom, coupled with short temporality of their work exacerbated by their adaptation to the instantaneity of information, wouldn't allow some media compagnies to often carry out long-term investigations. These consequences on the way that journalists treat information led scientists to portray journalistic work as very superficial and constitutes a criterion of lack of confidence in journalists, already known for centuries (Lemieux, 2000), but which is updated by new components brought by Internet. Moreover, local journalists are perceived by scientists as contributing to the decrease of their credibility and legitimacy by participating to the creation of a citizen knowledge validation scheme that compete with that of scientists. The loss of trust of some sea users in experts conduct them to set up what we have called a "social" rationality (Cottle, 2000) in the aim to legitimize their claims for managing shark risk through fishing. The "social" rationality of sea users is constituted of their experience, their empirical knowledge, rationalized by the use of science-based criteria. The appropriation of science-based criteria is permitted by an easier access to discourses about science on Internet and led scientists to think about the other citizens as drowned in a mass of information, unable to take a critical look at it, and adhering to knowledge validity criteria based on the frequency of dissemination of information in and between traditional and social media. Social media are perceived by scientists as an instance of validation of knowledge based on the criterion of repetition of the arguments by Internet users. In this context, journalists are perceived as contributors to this regime by using and disseminating information published on social media by their relationship which are involved in the controversy. The "circular" flow of discourse between traditional media and social media would represent a knowledge validation regime that would discredit that of scientific validation and increase the lack of trust of scientists in journalists. Beyond the

participation of Internet in the dynamics of trust relationship, it is also the editorial traditions of Reunion Island journalism that contribute to scientists' mistrust of local journalists. The local media maintain a habit of editorial opinions and debates, based on the Reunion Island socio-journalism history (Idelson & Lauret, 2020) which has been marked by the muzzling of some free Reunion media by the French State in the 1980s (Idelson, 2014). Nowadays, some local journalists do not hesitate to still denounce authorities in general. In the context of the shark risk expertise, some of them strongly criticized the experts, especially on their objectivity and sincerity in their risk management recommendations, and contributes to increase the mistrust of scientists in some local journalists.

### **Legitimacy and trust as an issue of social contract and sharing of values**

The “social contract” of the experts constitutes the objectives given to the expertise by the different parties of the controversy about shark risk management. For sea users, the social contract of experts was to lead a quick scientific expertise to provide scientific recommendations for an operational risk management for securing water sport activities. For the experts, their social contract was just to establish a panel of knowledges to eventually help decisions-making about shark risk management. The different representations of the social contract terms of the expertise represent the condition in which a mistrust in scientific expertise can develop. This mistrust reveals, more than a communicational gap between parties, an irreducible conflict of values about their social acceptability of the risk that have created alliances or oppositions between them.

The scientific expertise was constituted mainly of ecology experts. The epistemological approach of the ecology as a discipline is very linked to the green movement and inevitably carries out biocentric values that could impact the perception of the scientists ecologists' objectivity (Dobson, 1990; McIntosh, 1976; Yearley, 1995). Sea users shared mainly anthropological values that came into conflicts with those of scientific experts perceived as bringing biocentric values which can be visible along the whole expertise, from the non-lethal method experimentation they used on sharks, to their recommendations of man-shark cohabitation based on the behavior trends of the animals. This conflict of values between these two parties constitutes a second condition of mistrust of sea users towards experts. According to the values they carry, local journalists will develop trust relationship with scientists or sea users. Local journalists from university scholarship are closer to scientific experts and share with them the same scientific approach of the shark risk management. They also share biocentric values and both of them trust each other. Ecology experts, because of their

epistemological approach, support more often biocentric values, based on the priority of conservation and protection of the sharks, than fisheries experts who support more anthropological or eco centric values, which are based on the necessity to fish only potentially dangerous sharks to protect human water activities. The two of them can come into conflict about the appropriated scientific approach which must accompany the shark risk management. Sea users trust more fisheries experts because they share the same anthropological values. Local journalists who share these values because of their own sea culture, based mainly on their belonging to water sports lovers and/or fisheries communities, are closer to sea users and develop with them trust relationship. To summarize, local journalist can become partners to ecology experts or sea users in the controversy, based on the sharing of the same values concerning risk management. The bonds of trust developed between the parties can be stronger in the Reunion Island context. The island was a French colony that became a French overseas department in 1946. The Reunion society evolved between traditionality, inherited from a society model plantation, and modernity, marked by the desire of technical and social progress imported from mainland France. The Reunion society has a creole sociability based on mutual acquaintance (Simonin, 2000) that we can also find in the way in which the links of trust are created and strengthen between the parties of the controversy.

### **Internet and trust relationship: a necessary sociological approach**

Finally, relationship trust between parties, including experts and journalists, in a local controversy integrate local but also global components. The new issues bringing by Internet and instantaneity of information updated and exacerbated existing problems of lack of trust of scientists in journalists relating to conflicts of professional logics and to the liberal economic logic of some media, but also existing problems of lack of trust of citizen in experts linked to the perception of their social contract and irreducible conflicts of values. These dynamic trust relationships also embrace other components from the context where they develop, but also from the “cultural resonances” of the parties (Hansen, 2011), and remain singular at the prism of the history of the constitution of the dynamic public space of the territory where they are structured.

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