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The social indicators of the reputation of an expert

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Abstract

A notion that comes from the toolbox of social sciences, trust has become a mainstream epistemological concept in the last 15 years. Yet, the notion of epistemic trust has been distinguished from the notion of moral and social trust, the former involving kinds of inferences about the others that are rationally justifiable. If I trust a scientist about the efficacy of a vaccine against COVID-19, I must have an epistemic justification. I am therefore rationally justified in trusting her because I have an epistemic reason to justify my belief. I will challenge the distinction between epistemic and moral and social trust by pointing to several social indicators that contribute to our trustful attitudes in a reasonable way. Social indicators of reputation, values and moral commitments to values are indispensable strategies to come to trust in a rational way, an attitude that is different from merely believing the truth. I also point out the fragility of trusting experts’ reputations and stress the importance of avoiding some biases in trusting other people’s reputations to make our deference to expert more robust.

Keywords: Trust, Reputation, Experts, Social Indicators

A notion that comes from the toolbox of social sciences, trust has become a mainstream epistemological concept in the last fifteen years. Knowledge is a collective good, and trust relations are deeply embedded in our cognitive appraisal of what is true or false. We not only
rely on our mental faculties (perception and inference) to come to know: we defer to experts, ask friends, rely on the media in order to come out with a coherent picture of reality.

The notion of *epistemic trust* has been distinguished from the notion of *moral trust*, the former involving kinds of inferences about the others that are supposed to be justifiable in a rational matter (Rolin, 2020). If I trust a scientist about the efficacy of a vaccine against COVID-19, I must have an epistemic justification, for example, I trust her competence by checking her academic records (Anderson, 2011). I am therefore rationally justified in trusting her because I have an epistemic reason to justify my belief. Moral trust is a more complex notion that involves moral, emotional and social dimensions, that have been less discussed in the epistemological literature, with some notable exceptions (Faulkner, 2013, Almassi, 2021). Moral trust can also be rational when people trust the norms of scientific institutions to punish immoral behaviors such as plagiarism or conflict of interest. In such cases, trust is put more in the scientific organizations than in the single scientist (Hawley, 2017). Yet, what we interact with is not directly the epistemic and moral character of a scientist, but her reputation as established by her interactions in the social environment.

My aim in this paper is to add a dimension to the discussion on trust in experts by pointing to several social indicators of reputation that contributes to our trustful attitudes towards the experts. Reputation is a complex social/communicational phenomenon that involves not only what we think about an expert, but also what we think others think about her (Origgi, 2018). In most situations, we do not interact directly with the experts, nor with the content of their expertise, but with their reputations that spread around our social environment. The way in which we process this social information is a fundamental ingredient in our coming to trust.

**Introduction**

Anders Tegnell is a Swedish physician, expert in infectious diseases. He is the State Epidemiologist of the Public Health Agency in Sweden, an agency which has a formidable independence from the government. He became an international public figure during the COVID-19 pandemic for his controversial decision of not enforcing lockdowns, face masks and travel restrictions in Sweden in opposition to the widely adopted measures in the rest of the world. Tegnell has repeated many times that lockdowns are not supported by science and the evidence for mask-wearing is weak. Although the results were mixed (Brusselaers et al. 2022), with a first wave of COVID that killed 12000 people, more than the average death toll in all other Nordic European countries, Tegnell persisted in his policy, betting on herd
immunity and saying to his critics: “Judge me in a year”. After a second wave hit the country, an independent commission was appointed by the government to invest the Swedish response to the pandemic and some restrictive measures were introduced. Surprisingly, Tegnell did not lose his reputation and is still trusted by a majority of Swedish citizens. What made trust in such a divisive policy so robust? In this paper, I want to explore the various ways in which people come to trust experts which, as this example illustrates, go much beyond the simple epistemic assessment of their scientific reliability. Tegnell went on insisting on the weakness of the evidence about restrictions and masks even after the W.H.O. and the Centers of Disease Control (C.D.C.) had announced that there was enough evidence for recommending face covering. Where did his authority come from? Why people persisted in trusting him nonetheless? I will come back to this example after having analyzed the various social dimensions of reputation that ground our trust in experts.

Trust in experts is ubiquitous in our technoscientific societies. Most public policies depend on sophisticated scientific knowledge that only experts master appropriately. Not only the lay public, but also politicians have to rely on experts for ordinary decisions on policies about what is good or bad for health, where to travel, how to invest money, and in general what is permissible or not in a society. Experts and scientists are to be distinguished, though: scientists belong to a community of peers where special norms regulate the interactions among researchers and hierarchies of reputation and prestige are “objectively” established by widely acknowledged scientometric systems. Their results are generally not exposed to the lay public: they circulate in peer-reviewed journals that have paywalls for the general public and can sometimes be “translated” into news by science journalists. Experts are appointed by various institutions and government bodies to give their advice on a specific problem. They must be accountable not only by the scientific community, but by the public at large. The norms that regulate their recruitment are often opaque: they are neither elected nor selected within the community of peers according to its internal prestige criteria. Their legitimacy is thus dependent on the legitimacy of the government body that appoints them and not only on their scientific achievements. Trust is thus an essential ingredient of our relationship with experts: we give them a discretionary power of recommendation on high-stake issues concerning our life and our well-being. Whereas scientists can be evaluated on their epistemic reliability, experts need the trust of the public to be credible.

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I will argue that trust in experts is a complex attitude that involves epistemic, moral and social heuristics. We cannot come to trust an expert only on the basis of her expertise on a subject matter. We reason about her social role and her moral commitments in order to assess her overall reputation. Whereas the epistemic competence and the moral commitments have been analyzed in the literature on trust, the social dimension of the reputation of an expert is less explored.

As many have argued (Holton, 1994; Baier 1986), trusting someone is a matter of judging her competence (epistemic) in doing a certain task and her goodwill (moral) in taking into account our needs and values with respect to that task. We accept a certain dose of vulnerability in trusting others and we expect that this vulnerability is considered by the trustee as a normative pressure to act in responsible way towards us. In the case of experts, the evaluation of these two dimensions, epistemic and moral, doesn’t depend on a face-to-face interaction between the truster and the trustee: we do not interact directly with experts, rather, we gather information about their expertise and goodwill through complex social inferences about their reputation. In order to gather this information, we use all the possible social indicators of trustworthiness available in the social environment around us. That is why trust is a social competence that goes beyond our epistemic capacities and our moral expectations. In many circumstances, we do not have any direct information about the competence and the honesty of the experts. We only have access to social information about how other people have judged their competence and honesty. Good and bad reputations thus tend to stick to a person even when the reasons why they were attributed at the onset are forgotten. That is why the change in valence of a reputation needs a public/communicable event to happen: a scandal, a shaming campaign, or, in the positive case, the winning of a prize or a prestigious appointment. In the following, I will present the indirect social inferences we make in order to come up with a reputational assessment of the trustee by stressing the distribution in the social environment of the multiple cues of trustworthiness needed to build a reputation of the expert. I insist on the fact that reputation is a communicative phenomenon (Origgi 2018) that depends on what is said about a person: we don’t rely only on what the expert says and does, but hugely on what is said by other people about the expert.

The social indicators of trust and reputation
Reputation is not merely the opinion of others. It is an opinion that is verbalized, spoken, repeated and disseminated and that is therefore essentially communicative in nature. It is a cloud of opinions that is scattered through our social environment and communicated in various ways. This social information, what people say about whom, is everyday used to evaluate products on the Web (through features such as the five stars system of Amazon or the comments left by other customers), to evaluate the reputation of public characters such as politicians or celebrities, and to come to trust experts and institutions which we entrust with goods that are precious to us (our health, our children, our money, etc.).

In the case of experts, in order to filter this social information, we pay attention to features of the social environment that indicate what other people think about the expert and inform us about her trustworthiness. I call these features social indicators of reputation. Let us see some of these social indicators and what are the heuristics we use to extract information about them.

1. The authority of an expert is an important social indicator of her reputation. Authority is a social property of the expert that is formally established in the academic rankings by calculating how many people cite the work of the expert in question, that is, a communicative property. Other forms of public recognition contribute to establishing the authority of an expert: the winning of important prizes in one discipline indicates that peers of the expert have acknowledged her work in the field. Belonging to learned societies and international academies is another social indicator of peer recognition of the expertise. Furthermore, authority depends also on the charisma of the expert and the “aura” the surrounds her words. This kind of authority is indicated by the behavior of others towards the expert: a social indicator of the charisma of a speaker could be the fact that in a conference the audience pays a special attention to her speech: I see that other people appreciate the speaker and pay more attention to her words than to the others’ and take it as a social indicator of her authority. Authority depends crucially on what my “circle of authorities” thinks about the expert in question. We all live surrounded by circles of people whose opinions matter to us. The way these people evaluate the authority of an expert will be a social indicator for us that orients our own way to judge the expert. All these means to grasp the authority of the expert are in a sense indirect: we do not evaluate prima facie the truthfulness of her words, but her authority in the eye and the words of others, who can be peers of the expert or our peers.
2. *Influence* is another social indicator of trust. Influence is defined as the capacity to mobilize other people to action (Acerbi 2020). If my words have influence on you, I can for example convince you to get vaccinated against COVID-19 or to take precautionary measures to fight the pandemic. Traditionally, the influence of an expert was informally measured by seeing how many people around us were talking about that person or acting in accordance to her advice. Today, we still do this, but social media provide explicit, immediate and quantified cues of popularity. We can still ask around and get an idea of the popularity of an expert, but we can also check on the web the number of likes and shares that a message from the expert receives. Experts can also influence their own reputation by using social media, caring about their image, adopting a certain style of presentation. Reputation management on the social media has become a crucial aspect of the diffusion of information. An expert can be a better influencer if she manages her image on social media, for example by directly addressing her public and engaging them in a conversation making people perceive that they matter for her, or diffusing a message with a certain regular rhythm, so that people get used to receive the information at a certain time and this typically raises the trustworthiness of the information channel. Influence is the power to make people act. An expert whose message is capable of mobilizing people reinforces her reputation.

3. *Status* is a well-known social indicator of trustworthiness (Desmond, this issue). Status is one’s position in a hierarchy. Status hierarchies are group evolved adaptations that minimize conflict between individuals over limited resources in a population (Koski 2015). We possess evolved social capacities to detect cues of status in a group. The position in a hierarchy is a strong cue for status: If an expert is at the top of a hierarchy, she is perceived as a high-status person. To take the example of Anders Tegnell, his being the state epidemiologist of Sweden at the top of the Public Health Agency gives him a status of leader in his field. Again, status is an indirect cue of reputation because it is usually attributed by other people, who already hold a high status in a society. Yet, status can be also earned on the spot, by collective acts of deference towards a person (Gould 2002). If enough people makes an act of deference towards a person (like applauding, be silent when she speaks, or making any other gesture that signals her superiority in a hierarchy) she earns status on the spot. Status is a complex relationship: On one hand, it seems a zero-sum relation: if I attribute status to someone, I give up some of mine. On the other hand, as it has been showed
by the sociologist Roger Gould, status attributions depend on the reciprocity of the relationship, that is, one cannot climb a hierarchy indefinitely without reciprocating by acknowledging some status to her supporters (Gould 2002). A celebrity who never gives back something to her fans (like for example telling them “I love you”) will climb a hierarchy less easily than one that reciprocates with acts of deference that make people feel recognized. That means that, even if we lose status by deferring to an expert, by acknowledging her superiority, we receive at least in part recognition from the high-status person. Status is a social indicator because it depends on a collective attribution or a collective recognition of an attribution. We watch other people giving status to an expert and we align our behavior to this attribution.

4. **Values** are important social indicators of the reputation of an expert. In general, we trust those experts whose values match ours and are less confident when trusting an expert implies a big revision of our values. Values are shared in a community, and we learn them through our lifetime. There are epistemic as well as non-epistemic values when it comes to trust an expert, although many authors have challenged this distinction (Longino 1990; Fausto-Sterling 1985). Epistemic values are values within science, such as replicability or norms against plagiarism. Non-epistemic values are the general values a community holds, such as freedom, solidarity, etc. An expert whose values clash with that of her community has a less well-established reputation than an expert whose values align with it. Surprisingly, an expert can earn her reputation by going against the mainstream values when in a community there is a situation of “pluralistic ignorance” (Prentice 2007). Pluralistic ignorance is a situation in which a majority of group members privately reject a norm, but go along with it because they assume, incorrectly, that most others accept it. This is also described as "no one believes, but everyone thinks that everyone believes". When an expert can point to new values that a society is ready to endorse and go against mainstream values that everyone believes although it is no more the case, she can earn consensus and improve her reputation.

Are these social indicators of reputation rational heuristics to come to trust? Indeed, one can object that by following these indicators, we can end up trusting people that are not reliable, that manipulate their reputation to be acclaimed by everybody. Yet, in a Bayesian perspective, these heuristics allow us to gather a reputational portrait of the expert in question, going beyond her competence and honesty, the classical indicators of
trust that have been studied in the expert/novice problem literature. In a situation of knowledge deficit, the more indirect information I can gather on the expert, the more I raise the probability of putting my trust on her in a reasonable way. Also, it must be said that social information is the cheapest information available on the expert and it is unavoidable that people use it when knowledge is scarce. In most situations, we do not interact directly with the expert, but with what is said about her and with the behaviors that the expert elicits. We extract the reputation of the expert by listening to others and make use of this social information to assess their trustworthiness.

To maximize the rationality of our use of social information, an exercise in metacognition could be useful. We may combine these different social indicators and see whether a coherent picture of the expert emerges. A certain balance among the indicators should be a criterion for a good reputation of an expert. If, for example, an expert ranks high in influence, but low in authority, we may infer that she is someone who is able to use the social media to influence other people’s behavior without being a certified expert by her peers. If someone has a high authority with low influence, we may infer that the expert is one who is not able to communicate about her work, or does not want to, and thus consider this as a lack of trustworthiness. In general, a coherence among the different dimensions of reputation is a sign of trustworthiness of the expert.

Why Do the Swedes Trust Anders Tegnell?

After this analysis of the social indicators of reputation, I come back to the example presented above with the question: How do people reason to trust a divisive expert such as Anders Tegnell, who goes against the mainstream views on the pandemic? My hypothesis is that the Swedes have used social indicators of reputation to support Tegnell’s divisive choices. Tegnell has clearly authority, being the Head of the Public Health Agency of Sweden. He has also personal charisma and is known for his stubbornness and strong character in making decisions. His choice of not endorsing the measures taken by other countries was largely discussed on the social media, giving him a lot of exposure and power of influence. As a high-status person, he was able to reciprocate to those who defer to him by acknowledging their status as free and

\[\text{See this interview on the Financial Times, September 11th, 2020 : https://www.ft.com/content/5cc92d45-fbdb-43b7-9c66-26501693a371}\]
autonomous persons, capable to self-regulate their behaviors, without imposing restrictions from the top of the State. This reciprocity of recognition gave him even a higher status in the eyes of the Swedes, who felt acknowledged in their values of freedom and autonomy. Values were a crucial component of his reputation: he appealed to shared values in the Swedish community and this reinforced trust in his position. Also, he went against the mainstream values of prudence and coercion of behaviors that were endorsed by many other countries by making emerge other values that people were entertaining privately without being able to give them a voice, and this made of him a sort of “hero” of a different value approach to the pandemic. He expresses the values of the Swedish community, such as independence, autonomy, and freedom, that go with a “Swedish way of life” of collective responsibility about civic issues. These values are also protected by the Swedish Constitution, that states, in Chapter 2, Article 8, that: “Everyone shall be protected in their relations with the public institutions against deprivations of personal liberty. All Swedish citizens shall also in other respects be guaranteed freedom of movement within the Realm and freedom to depart the Realm”. Also, the independence and autonomy of the Public Health Agency of Sweden is guaranteed by the Constitution, Chapter 12, Article 2: “No public authority, including the Riksdag, or decision-making body of any local authority, may determine how an administrative authority shall decide in a particular case relating to the exercise of public authority vis-à-vis an individual or a local authority, or relating to the application of law”.

This is not to say that Tegnell is right is his choice: at this stage of the evolution of the pandemic we still cannot judge entirely his appeal to herd immunity and to the responsibility of the citizens, and a lot of debate is ongoing about the appropriateness of the Swedish response (Brusselaers, 2022). In July 2021, 60% of the Swedish population has been vaccinated, clearly showing that appealing to the responsibility of the citizens was a right bet. As for herd immunity, the discovery of the vaccine has changed the predictive models, although researchers have shown that in Stockholm herd immunity under limited restrictions was reached in November 2020 (Carlsson, Soderberg-Naucler 2021). This is to say that when it comes to trusting experts, people do not confront themselves directly with the content of the expertise, although they may try to gather information to establish alone the truthfulness of what the expert says by reading reports and articles on the subject matter. Rather, they reason about the reputation of the expert, by merging different indicators of reputation in a social image of the expert that is
coherent and shared by other people around them. The social capacity of making
inferences about someone’s reputation is distinct from the epistemic capacity of making
inferences about the content of what she says, yet these capacities are always combined
when we come to trust an expert. Epistemic trust and social trust are thus inseparable in
evaluating expertise.

How reliable are reputations?

As we have seen, reputations are complex social constructs that involve a number of
dimensions and a thick social network through which people filter information. Yet, they
are notoriously fragile and can be manipulated to look better than they are. Thus, what are
the conditions under which a reputation is reliable? If, as I argue in this article,
reputations are a reasonable way to acquire information about experts, we should make
sure that they are reliable enough to pick the right source of information. As I said earlier,
reputation is a communicative phenomenon: it is “what is said about whom”. Thus, a
crucial ingredient of a reliable reputation is the reputation of those who recommend the
expert. Reputation comes in circles of social recognition that are more or less close to us.
Experts usually belong to circles that are very distant from our own circles. But the circles
that go from the expert to ourselves are connected through a series of acts of deference
made within each circle. If I trust my doctor because I know her reputation, I may trust
her recommendation for another doctor. I thus acquire social information about the
second doctor by using the reputation of the first one. In this way, I can evaluate a
reputation that is closer to my circle, which I have more social information about, and
trust this reputation to evaluate a more distant reputation. In this way, the reputation on a
distant expert is anchored into the reputation of those whom I trust in my closer circles.
Thus, it is crucial to have appropriate criteria to evaluate the reputations that are in circles
closer to ours. Here comes the fragility of reputations, because people often trust their
peers for motives that are not reasonable. There are some biases that are typical when we
come to trust our peers. Here below I will list some of these biases as a warning about
what we should not do when we come to trust our peers.

Homophily: In psychology, homophily is the tendency of preferring people with the same
personality traits and connect with them easily (Kets, Sandroni 2019). When we come to
trust an informant, homophily may act as a bias making us prefer opinions that are shared
by people that are like us. In order to avoid this, we should be able to pay attention to those informants whose epistemic superiority compared to ours is evident: for example, those informants who are more competent on a subject matter or have a past record of good recommendations in a field. In a word, we must accept a certain amount of “epistemic asymmetry” between us and our informants instead of privileging those who are like us. In this way, we can build a “hierarchy of reputations” that makes us connect in a more reliable way with the reputation of the expert we end up to trust.

**Trespassing:** We tend to trust people who have revealed trustworthy even in domains in which they are not competent. This is called *domain trespassing* and can act as a bias in our judgments of trustworthiness. Trust is a three places relation where a person trusts another person on a particular subject matter. I can trust my banker to care about my money, but I would not trust her to care about my children. Thus, it is important to stick to the reputation of someone in our circle that is relevant for the domain which we need to come to trust about. Trespassing is something that many people tend to do expressing judgements outside their domain of competence by relying on their reputation in that very domain. In the absence of any kind of information, one can have the temptation to rely on the judgement of someone who at least has a reputation in a domain even on subjects that do not pertain her field. But this is always fragile and can lead to defer to the wrong recommendations.

**Divergence of interests:** Sometimes people may recommend us an expert because they have an interest in doing this that doesn’t converge with our interests. A doctor may recommend us another doctor because she’s a friend of her and has interest in sending her new patients. A wine seller may recommend us a bottle because she has a deal with a winemaker and makes more profit by selling that brand instead of another. We should check the convergence of interest when we come to trust the reputations of those who are in our circles and direct us towards the reputations of some experts.

**Caring for one’s own reputation:** In many occasions, we conform to a judgement about the reputation of an expert because we care about our own reputation in a circle. If all our sources of information trust an expert, we prefer to align our judgment with theirs so that we maintain a reputation in a group. If all my teachers in philosophy trust the reputation of Jacques Derrida, I may end up aligning my judgment to keep my reputation in their
eyes. This is why it is wise to keep an eye on what happens in other circles that are close enough to ours to be reachable and checking the independence of the sources of information to avoid “guru” effects (Sperber 2010) in which everybody ends up trusting the reputation of an expert only to defend her reputation in front of a circle of peers.

To sum up, navigating social information requires an awareness of certain biases we may have in filtering what our informants say about the reputation of experts. Even if we do not have direct access to the content of the expertise, we can become more sophisticated trusters by using social indicators with an awareness on who says what about whom.

Conclusion

Trusting experts requires many social competences that allow us to navigate the social information that surrounds them. The mere criteria of competence and honesty are often too difficult to evaluate by the lay people. Social information is the more and more diffused around us and we cannot avoid using it to establish the reputation of an expert. Yet, these reputations are fragile and we should be aware of the mechanisms through which they spread as well of the biases that may apply to our way of reasoning around them. In absence of information about the content of the expertise at stake, we may nonetheless become sophisticated evaluators of the social cues of reputation and trustworthiness that link us, through complex chains of deference, to the expert in question.

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