



FRANCE STRATÉGIE
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ABSTRACT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXPERTISE AND DEMOCRACY. COPING WITH MISTRUST

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QUESTION

The idea that “people have had enough of experts”, identified as the ruling elites who they no longer trust, has emerged increasingly over the past several decades. Occurring more acutely around a number of recent events, this phenomenon is often linked to the development of ‘fake news’ and more widely to the upheaval concerning hierarchies and regulators of information content in the digital world.

Similarly, public action, which is becoming ever more technical and ever less explicitly related to ideological preferences, seems to be increasingly reliant on specialists to prepare, implement, and assess the policies that it undertakes. Meanwhile, the discourse of policy makers frequently hovers between exploiting expertise and denouncing experts.

What is it then, in the way in which expertise is mobilised, produced and distributed, that is likely to create the mistrust present amongst the population?

To answer this question, the subject under discussion must first be identified. In this case, the subject is expertise. Sociologists define expertise as a role, and experts as individuals listed in a position of expertise (most frequently on a temporary basis); in other words, experts are acknowledged and appointed through their relations with stakeholders, these stakeholders being decision-makers, journalists, and citizens.

The challenge is therefore to understand what does or doesn’t work in these relationships, in order to conceive initiatives likely to limit misunderstandings, bridge the gap between the cultures of the various stakeholders and to reduce the spread of mistrust.

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APPROACH

Due to the relational nature of expertise, adopting the views of principal stakeholders (*policy-makers, specialists called upon as experts, media professionals and citizens*) within a position of expertise was necessary. A year-long seminar was organised within this perspective, during which individuals were invited to share their questions on the driving forces of mistrust.

The intention of this was not to indict falsifiers and spreaders of 'fake' information, as can sometimes occur too easily, nor criticise citizens for insufficient scientific literacy, but rather to sincerely question the difficulties concerning the production, distribution and circulation of 'correct' information. The 'Expert opinions: for what purpose?' seminar therefore brought together elected representatives, researchers, administrators, community leaders, journalists, and think tank leaders around the same table in order to draw up a global picture of the relationships that constitute expertise and the way in which stakeholders picture the challenges they face, as well as to develop discussions to cover a series of topics (health, education, climate, etc.).

Accounts and comments collected within this framework formed the basis for preparation of the report. They were supplemented by a double-sided analysis work on the one hand based in the contemporary context in order to demonstrate the changes the fulfilment of expert functions are subjected to, and on the other hand, the analysis was anchored in the history of expertise in France in order to review developments made to systems for knowledge production and use, which are useful for public action.

ANALYSIS

First, this work indicates that mistrust towards expertise is not a new phenomenon. However, it has taken on a new form at present, linked notably to digitisation, without the need to overestimate the impact of social networks on citizen representations. Mistrust, which should not be understood as the opposite of trust, but rather as its critical shadow, seems harder than ever to overcome in a world where the authorities are increasingly struggling to be heard. Based on available data – which is surely fragmented – it is also highly polarised according to citizens' political preferences and partially determined by their socio-economic positioning.

More specifically, the classic French State knowledge model, centralised and made available to the executive, was further weakened compared to others due to the growing plurality of competing expertise currently circulating in the 'market'; the executive and its experts have found it difficult to move away from the top-down stance historically adhered to. To agree to hearing the opinions of a range of voices on issues related to definition and implementation in the general interest; a number of scandals have warned of the risks concerning conflicts of interest that weighed heavy on the shoulders of experts and public officials, with Parliament resorting only recently to counter-expertise tools.

Attempts to 'restore trust' have often resulted in the emergence of new obstacles. This is why the report looks at 'an aporia of trust' to discuss the various pressure points faced by producers and commissioners of expertise as they seek to refine their practices in a bid to reconnect with citizens. A number of lessons can be learnt from recent history in this area.



- Over time, the mobilisation of knowledge has been determined in significantly different ways according to the various areas of public action. Approaches concerning the institutionalisation and proceduralisation of expertise were designed to reverse mistrust; while they were able to reduce the role of certain 'self-proclaimed' experts, it was also occasionally seen that they merely shifted the subject of mistrust, which is now addressed at institutions rather than at the content of expertise alone.
- Despite the lack of independence by some experts being the source of much criticism, it would be futile to resort to using experts that are completely detached from any shared interests as an ideal to be pursued. What must be guaranteed, however, is the strength of the incentives that encourage experts to act in accordance with the interests attached to the role that they fulfil (professional legitimacy and recognition, for example). In effect, an expert who assumes involvement is not necessarily of less relevance than an expert claiming to be neutral: values can play a productive role in the search for knowledge, as well as clarify points which could have otherwise gone unnoticed. Since experts are necessarily situated within a position of expertise, it is ultimately important to clarify the specific position of experts sharing their views in a transparent manner.
- Demand for citizen participation in expertise and the decision prepared by it is neither new nor devoid of ambiguities; the challenge is to break away from alternative 'expertise or participation' in order to develop a framework in which citizens' voices that are heard enable expertise to be enriched and the understanding of a subject to be broadened, including its confrontational aspects. The cost of citizen participation (both economic and organisational) remains high, and the willingness of French citizens to actively engage in current participatory approaches is doubtful.
- While expertise is plural in nature, this plurality does not always come in the form of harmonious complementarity. Competition between disciplines, approaches and methods can often be seen. It is a question of understanding that the phenomenon is not accidental and reveals a frequently strong link between the way in which knowledge of a subject is grasped and the priorities that are being promoted. This pushes the ideal of an impartial and overarching expert even further away.
- In terms of competition between various forms of expertise, quantitative approaches have a significant competitive advantage linked to their objective and conclusive form, as well as the concise way in which they are presented. However, the primacy of quantification leads to some negative effects that can fuel mistrust: concealment of what is not 'quantifiable', equity of immeasurable realities, and substitution of means (followed by quantified indicators) for political purposes.
- In the longer term, while big data and artificial intelligence are expected to offer public services fine-tuned to particular needs, there is also a fear that the automated processing of social data will make it harder to debate analysis upon which public action is based.

In general, burning questions at a given time differ across the field of science, the political arena, and the media landscape. Therefore, it seems futile to hope that additional scientific knowledge will single-handedly settle public controversies and political disputes.

As such, the report recommends 'coping with mistrust', rather than seeking to eradicate it. Therefore, modesty must be the priority not only for the experts themselves, but also for those who use expertise and those who propose improvements to the operation of expert institutions.



RECOMMENDATIONS

'Coping with mistrust' does not mean surrendering to it, but rather taking it seriously, attempting to use citizen-led expressions of mistrust for support to incorporate them into expert bodies in order to transform the latter and enrich their work. The report proposes to start from the principle of modesty in a bid to breathe new thinking into discussions and practices related to expertise, and to be guided by it in order to reform institutions and procedures involved in expertise.

It is important to strive towards three objectives: respond to citizens' questions as they ask themselves the questions; make expertise, its productions and its uses more understandable to all, and bring together the various cultures of stakeholders who are often unaware of the constraints and interests of others. The report's recommendations have been developed based on these objectives.

In order to answer citizens' questions, the report suggests:

- a Defender of the Right of Access to Expertise that can be accessed online, in order to offer a public response to queries raised by citizens and to the questions they ask themselves concerning public action issues that could be enlightened by scientific knowledge;
- a drawing right for citizens on public interest research work inspired by issues identified by the Defender of the Right of Access to Expertise;
- the creation of citizen committees responsible for supporting various public policy assessments.

In order to make expertise, its productions and its uses more understandable:

- a greater transparency of expert referrals made by the executive power;
- a body specifically dedicated to discussion between Human and Social Sciences and the Government, in a bid to facilitate interactions between researchers and policy makers;
- setting up independent services responsible for assessing public policies in key ministries;
- an extension of the capacities of Parliament's counter-expertise, to promote debates informed by a range of sources during discussions on draft laws and the assessment of their implementation;
- opening up debates on the production and use of statistics to the general public.

In order to bring the cultures of various stakeholders together:

- circulation tools for the expertise of field stakeholders within French ministries to facilitate reporting of lessons that have emerged from practice, and to enable officials to find answers to their questions;
- a public multimedia network for the promotion of scientific literacy and simplification of the status of research for subjects being debated;
- joint training courses for those preparing to take up various roles in positions of expertise: not only training researchers in public speaking, but also training political and administrative officials, as well as journalists, in epistemology and the scientific method.

