Digital mistrust: Rethinking trust in digitalizing societies

While there is little agreement within academia, and beyond, as to the precise meaning of the term *trust*, there is broad consensus as to its importance across various societal scales; whether it be relations between states, between citizens and states, within communities, institutions, and organizations, or the plethora of interpersonal relationships that are formative of everyday practice. Trust is said to enhance our ability to make agreements with one another, to uphold contractual arrangements, to promote self-expression, to reduce crime, and even to generate more happiness. In welfare societies, in particular, trust is seen as a key societal resource that must be nurtured and guarded in order to maintain welfare in challenging times. Recently, trust has become an object of rigorous measurement and an important rhetorical asset in political discourse. As a result, measuring the general level of trust between groups and institutions in society has become common, and such measurements are increasingly seen as primary health indicators of the body politic.

Within academia, research describing, and conceptualizing trust has developed within the confines of various social science disciplines. In economics, trust is broadly seen as a way to reduce complexity and facilitate smoother exchanges of information within economic systems (Moore 1994; Gambetta 1988; Williamson 1993). In sociology, trust is integral to ongoing discussions about social cohesion and social capital (Hooghe 2007; Putnam 2000) and is seen as an important aspect of the distribution of power among groups in society (Seligman 2000, Luhmann 2018). Political scientists talk of trust in various modes; institutional, social, and political. In particular, the role of trust in the functioning of political and electoral systems, or how trust in government institutions varies across different socio-political groups are common concerns (Rose et al. 2013). In anthropology, trust and its converse, mistrust, are generally emphasized as having culturally specific, social, and socio-economic forms (Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2017, 2019). As such, trust is often seen as entangled in ethical regimes and institutional economies of information, audit accountability and transparency (Strathern 2000, Jimenez 2011).

Today, scholars are posing questions about how a veritable explosion in digitally mediated relations are both conditional upon long standing relations of trust, and potentially disruptive of those very relations. While trust in technology, knowledge and expertise has been a long-standing area of social scientific enquiry – especially within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the history of technology (Jasanoff 2009, MacKenzie 1998, Porter 1996) – rapid digitalization, we claim, inflects questions of trust in ways that are both historically congruent and disjunctive. However, the notion of the digital here needs to be broadened out to account for the effects that digitally mediated relations have on what might be classically conceived as the non-digital (or, analogue). While the litany of controversies over data ethics and predictive technologies grows daily, as does the appearance of large technology companies performing mea culpas before democratically elected legislatures around the world – asking the public to, once again, trust them––an unease around who, what, and how we can trust in ever-increasingly digitally mediated relationships continues.

Shoshanna Zuboff asserts that questions of trust reside at the heart of 'surveillance capitalism' (2019). The effort to create fully datafied societies, she argues, is shrouded in under-articulated risks where questions of monitoring and compliance have already begun to supersede those of governance. For Zuboff, this represents a form of "machinic" sociality and politics, one that displaces uncertainty, mutual obligation, and reciprocity – the very forms that social scientists argue trust takes – and, in the process, evacuates the need for trust. One response to this critique – from within computer science, data analytics, and design circles – is to embrace such "machinic" thinking more comprehensively by d*esigning for trust* within digital infrastructures and software

architectures (Bruun, Andersen & Mannov 2020). Other approaches are concerned with the need to reconceptualize not just what trust in the digital and in data might mean, but importantly what kinds of relations of trust and mistrust are emerging between state actors, private corporations and citizens in the age of rapid digitalization (Sheikh and Højer 2018)

The aim of this special issue is to gather a collective—anthropologists, STS scholars, and researchers from cognate disciplines—who are actively working with questions of (mis)trust in digitalizing contexts. We invite contributions that have been developed through research on trust from among topics such as:

- Coding, software, and algorithms.
- Digital infrastructures.
- Social credit systems.
- Surveillance, cryptography, Distributed ledger technologies.
- Fake news and disinformation.
- Predictive technologies.
- Big Tech regulation.
- Data governance.
- The digitalization of the public sector and corporate organizations.
- Digital methods and quali-quant mixed methods approaches.
- Anti-digitalization movements.
- Attention and digital distractions.

While the contributions can be heterogeneous in their empirical and analytical garbs, they must share a commitment to producing robust and analytically creative accounts around questions of (mis)trust and the digital.

Please send an abstract (250-300 words) and a short author bio (approx. 50 words) to Kristoffer Albris (**kristoffer.albris@sodas.ku.dk**) no later than the **1st of February 2021.** You should expect to hear from the editorial team by 1st of March regarding your abstract. We are aiming for provisional drafts of papers to be submitted on the 1st of September 2021. We are reaching out to several journals but are also open to suggestions from contributors.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have questions or comments regarding any of the above.

About the editors:

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