

Trust and Trustworthiness

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Introduction/Report Abstract

The importance of Trust in Government

1. Confucius argued that governments need three things: weapons, food, and trust. If a ruler can't hold on to all three, he should give up food first and then weapons. Trust must be protected at all costs. Onora O'Neill develops this thought. She notes that "weapons did not help the Taliban when their foot soldiers lost trust and deserted. Food shortages need not topple governments when they and their rationing systems are trusted, as we know from WWII" (2002, p.1).
2. The question of trust in governments, the media, and expertise, is increasingly becoming one of the vital questions in contemporary public life. In part, a slate of scandals in the early and late 2000s such as the 2008 financial crisis, the UK expenses, media phone hacking, have all lead to a mounting scepticism of across both public and private sectors. More recently, there have been crises of trust in expertise, both with climate change denial and vaccine hesitancy during the covid-19 pandemic. Distrust across sectors have led to claims that we are living in a "post-truth" society, which furthers perceptions of untrustworthiness and increases public mistrust. This series of reports focuses specifically on the question of public trust in public organisations and government and proposes solutions for working towards restoring public trust.
3. All governments, and public organisations more generally, must be trustworthy. Trustworthy governments and public organisations are competent in satisfying their objectives and judicious in choosing their objectives. They also act in the public interest rather than the interests of a select few. But being trustworthy matters little if it is not recognised by citizens. And trustworthiness does not always guarantee public trust. To gain trust, public organisations must successfully communicate their trustworthiness to potential trustors.
4. A common approach to securing trustworthiness in public organisations and public trust is by creating institutions that regulate public organisations' operations, and that report independently and impartially to the public on how it is performing. Public Audit bodies such as Audit Scotland form part of that system of regulation and public accountability. Supporters of public audit believe that the independent assurance which public audit offers on how well public money is being spent and how services are performing supports trustworthiness and demonstrates that trustworthiness to the public. Opponents of audit argue that the reporting of governance and performance failures by audit undermines either trustworthiness or public trust in public organisations.

The focus of my research

5. My research had three objectives:

1. To establish a theory of public trust and distrust, and of public organisational trustworthiness and untrustworthiness.
2. To examine the relationship between audit practice and public organisational trustworthiness to help us understand in what ways audit can positively impact trustworthiness.
3. To establish a theory of communication that enables public organisations (including public auditors) to communicate their trustworthiness to the public.

6. This is the first of a series of three Audit Scotland reports which will outline the key conclusions of my research and suggest positive recommendations both for public organisations who aim to develop both the trustworthiness of their organisations and public trust in their organisations. Each report will focus on one of the above objectives. This report will explain what it means for public organisations to be trustworthy organisations. The second report will articulate a theory of audit practice that is conducive to trustworthiness in public organisations. The third report will articulate a trust-conducive model of public engagement that public organisations can use to build public trust in their organisations.

Why Trust matters

7. There are two reasons why trust in government and public organisations matters. The first kind of reason is **instrumental**. This means that public trust provides a number of benefits which make it worth having. The benefits of strong public trust include:

1. It makes the public more forgiving when mistakes are made.
2. It streamlines cooperation between public organisations, enhancing efficiency.
3. When there is trust in public organisations, people think well of those organisations, associating them with virtues such as honesty and integrity.
4. Strong mutual trust increases the willingness of trustors to be more open, honest and transparent with each other.

8. The second type of reason to care about trust is **intrinsic**. This means that public trust is valuable, no matter the consequences. All public institutions hold positions of political power over citizens who are subject to the discretion of these authorities. It could be argued that without the trust of these citizens, the authority of these institutions is illegitimate. If this is so, then public trust matters because it is an essential condition for a legitimate political authority. As an

example to support this view, consider the public reaction to cases in which those in positions of public policy abuse their power, such as police brutality in the United States with the murder of George Floyd, leading to a resulting rejection by some citizens of police authority. If people are justified in their reactions, then this suggests that where there is public distrust, there is a lack of legitimate authority.

'the public are the police, the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence' (*Robert Peel*)

1. Defining Trust and Trustworthiness

Introduction

9. The aim of this report is to outline what it means for the public to trust or distrust public organisations, and what it means for those organisations to be either trustworthy or untrustworthy. An understanding of these concepts is essential if we want to build public trust in public organisations. Understanding clearly what public trust is will give us a target to aim at, while our understanding of distrust will give us a target to avoid. And an understanding of what it means for public organisations to be trustworthy and untrustworthy will do the same.

10. In my research, I argue that *commitments* are central to understanding all four concepts. A commitment is something that individuals can make, but it is also something that organisations can and often do make. When an organisation makes a commitment, it expresses publicly some objective, and it allows the public to rely on it to meet that objective. For example, if a local hospital tells its patients that they can expect “prompt and effective healthcare service” then it has a commitment to providing prompt and effective service. When the Liberal Democrats signed the “Vote for Students Pledge” to freeze tuition fees ahead of the 2015 election, they made a commitment to honour the terms of the pledge should they be elected. When the United States signed the Paris Climate Agreement 2016, they made a commitment to honour its terms, along with all other signatories.

11. Trust is about having positive expectations that those we trust will honour their commitments if we rely on them to keep them. Being trustworthy is about honouring those commitments. That two of the examples used above are cases of broken commitments is important because, as we’ll see in this report, it is imperative that organisations are judicious in taking on commitments to maintain their trustworthiness.

12. In section 1, we’ll look at what public trust and distrust amount to more clearly. In section 2, we’ll look at organisational trustworthiness and untrustworthiness. In section 3, I will introduce what I take to be the central commitments of any public organisation if it is to be trustworthy. In section 4, I will conclude the report with a summary and list of key recommendations for organisations aiming at making their organisations more trustworthy.

Trust, Distrust & Commitments

13. Suppose that you have a big report due at work. At the same time, you have some personal troubles in your home life and are finding it difficult to balance these difficulties with getting this report done. A colleague offers to take up the slack for you, getting a portion of the report finished so that you can get it in on time. You are confident that your colleague will be able to do this and so you

accept their proposal. If the colleague pulls through you are grateful to them and would be willing to count on them again in the future. If they fail, you will feel resentful, angry, perhaps even betrayed, and you would not count on them in the future.

14. The above example is an instance of **trust as commitments**. On this theory, when your colleague offers to take up the work for you, they are making a commitment. Whether you trust the colleague depends on your **expectations** of your colleague if you choose to rely on them to keep the commitment. If you believe that the colleague will get the work done if you rely on them to do it, then you trust them. If you believe that the colleague will not get the work done if you rely on them, then you distrust them.

Defining Trust and Distrust

<p>Trust – If you trust someone, then you believe that they will keep their commitments if you rely on them to do so.</p>
<p>Distrust – If you distrust someone, then you believe they will fail to keep their commitments if you rely on them to do so.</p>

15. The above example was a simple one. It is a case of trust between two individual people. But we want to understand public trust in public organisations, so we need to apply these definitions to this context. Let's start with public trust. When there is public trust, this means that a majority of individual citizens believe that if they rely on public organisations to keep their commitments, that such organisations will keep those commitments.

16. Public organisations are complex entities, and they often have multiple commitments. The NHS, for example, has the very general commitment of providing free health care at the point of use to citizens. We can break this complex commitment into sub commitments. One commitment is to provide citizens with its service *free* at the point of use. A second sub commitment is the provision of quality health care. Trust in the NHS might break down because the NHS fails to meet one, or both, or these sub-commitments. If the NHS ceases to provide free services, then we will believe that we can't rely on it to keep a commitment to providing such services, or if the quality of health care dips, we can't rely on it to keep a commitment to providing quality health care. In sum then, when thinking about whether we trust a public organisation, we need to have a clear picture of what its commitments are, first and foremost. Once we know what those commitments are, we need to ask ourselves whether we are confident in our belief that this organisation will keep all, or at least most, of its core commitments. The more confident we are in this, the more we trust the organisation. The less confident we are, the less we trust.

17. To distrust a public organisation is to go through the same process of outlining the core commitments of the organisation in question, and then determining whether we think the organisation will keep these commitments if we rely on it to do so. If our answer is entirely or mostly negative, then we will distrust the organisation. We will say that there is public distrust in a public organisation when either a majority, or a salient minority of citizens have this negative attitude of that organisation.

Public Trust & Distrust in Public Organisations

Public Trust in Public Organization X – If there is public trust in public organisation X, then the majority of members of the public believe that if they rely on organisation X to keep its commitments, it **will** keep all or most of those commitments.

Public Distrust in Public Organization X – If there is public trust in public organisation X, then the majority of members of the public believe that if they rely on organisation X to keep its commitments, it **will not** keep all or most of those commitments.

2.Trustworthiness, Untrustworthiness & Commitments

18. The meaning of trustworthiness is self-evident. A trustworthy person is one that is worthy of trust. We defined trust as the belief that a person will keep their commitments if they are relied on to do so. To be worthy of this belief, then, a person must be the sort of person who does keep their commitments when they are relied upon. Likewise, an untrustworthy person is one who is worthy of distrust. We defined distrust as the belief that a person won't keep their commitments if they are relied on to do so. So, an untrustworthy person is one who does not keep their commitments when relied on to do so.

19. There are **two** key components of an organisation being trustworthy. Firstly, it must be **competent** with respect to meeting its commitments. This means that it must have the capacity to meet its commitments. What this means is that an organisation must have the resources and the necessary expertise to achieve its objective. Resources include materials and employees. For the NHS to be trustworthy, it must have not only well-functioning medical equipment at its disposal, but a body of people, including doctors, nurses, managers, administrative staff, and leaders, who all play their part to deliver effective health care to patients. And of course, all of these people must be individually competent in fulfilling their own roles. A hospital containing only incompetent doctors would hardly be able to provide effective health care to patients.

20. The second component of organisational trustworthiness is **judiciousness**. A trustworthy person is not just someone who has the competence to meet commitments, but it is one who is selective in their commitments, taking up only commitments that they know they can keep, and that do not conflict with their other commitments (Hawley, 2019). Thus, those who have the power in an organisation to make commitments must be judicious about the commitments they make by recognising their limitations and taking up only commitments that they are confident that they can keep.

Two Conditions for Organisational Trustworthiness

21. Competence – An organisation's ability to satisfy its commitments e.g. material resources, employees playing relevant roles, & competent employees.

22. Judiciousness – An organisation is judicious if those in charge of commitment making select only commitments that the organisation is capable of keeping.

Case Study: Test and Trace in England, Covid-19 and Untrustworthiness

23. An example of government untrustworthiness can be seen by examining Boris Johnson's unfulfilled promises relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, Johnson made a litany of public commitments about the UK's ability to defeat the pandemic, which we subsequently backtracked. In May 2020, Johnson said "We have growing confidence that we will have a test, track and trace operation that will be world-beating, and yes, it will be in place by 1 June" (Syal, 2020). On 11th December, the National Audit Office found that the government had spent £13.5bn on a test-and-trace programme that failed to meet many of its main targets, especially when cases rose sharply in December 2020 (Department of Health and Social care 2020).

24. This is an example of a failure of trustworthiness both in terms of judiciousness and competence. Johnson's failure is a failure of judiciousness. In overpromising the effectiveness of his test, track and trace operation, he implied that citizens could rely on the Test and Trace system. But the system then fails to deliver on many of its key objectives. This could also be to a failure of judiciousness on the part of those working on the Test and Trace in England system, as well as a failure of organisational competence, if the organisations involved did not have the resources to deliver those targets.

25. The above case is important, because it highlights a very important and well-known rule of thumb for organisations seeking to maintain trustworthiness and a trustworthy reputation. Don't make commitments that you cannot keep! Failures in judiciousness lead organisations to overcommit and inevitably disappoint, even with the best intentions, those that rely on them.

26. At the same time, it is important for organisations not to under commit. A public organisation that never makes any commitments also cannot be trusted. Suppose the NHS ceases to make any commitments to providing quality health care that is free at the point of use. If it failed to do this, then we would have reason to doubt whether we ought to rely on it to provide quality health care at the point of use.

27. A judicious organisation is one where those that make the organisation's commitments sit in the middle of the two extremes.



The Commitments of Public Organisations

28. So far, we know what it means for the public trust public organisations. And we know what it means for public organisations to be trustworthy. We have defined trust and trustworthiness in terms of commitments. We've explained what commitments are, but it will also be helpful to get an understanding of what kinds of commitments public organisations have. We don't have the space to do this for every public organisation, but fortunately, I think that there are four basic kinds of commitments that all public organisations have. These are as follows:

1. Commitments to fulfil organisational purpose(s)
2. Commitments to fulfil any expressed commitments
3. Commitment to legitimising their political authority
4. Commitments to fulfil moral, political, and legal obligations

29. Every public organisation has a purpose. The NHS has the purpose of providing free health care to citizens at the point of use. The police force has the purpose of protecting citizens from criminal activity, political parties have the purpose of representing the public interest, and Audit Scotland has the purpose of providing public assurance that public money is spent effectively, efficiently, and provides value for money. All public organisations are committed to fulfilling these purposes. This should be obvious. Just as a blunt axe that can't chop wood would not be relied on to chop wood, a public organisation failing to achieve its primary function should not be trusted.

30. Political and public organisations often express new commitments to the public through their leaders. When a political party writes a new manifesto, it fills this manifesto with a list of commitments that the party pledges to keep if it is elected. When countries signed the 2015 Paris Agreement, these countries expressed commitments to honour the terms of this agreement. Or when Boris Johnson stated that he was very confident that we could turn the tide against the coronavirus within 12 weeks in March 2020, he expressed an implicit commitment to making significant gains in the fight against the virus. Whenever organisations express through their members, new commitments, they invite citizens to rely on them to meet those commitments. If they are to be trustworthy, then, organisations must be competent and judicious in making and keeping these commitments.

31. In the introduction to this report, I argued that the authority of any political or public organisation is (at least in part) grounded in the trust of those beholden to that authority. If this is true, then these organisations need to work to establish and maintain trust in their authority for that authority to be legitimate. Therefore, such organisations are committed to building and maintaining public trust in themselves.

32. Public organisations are also beholden to a wider set of important moral, political, and legal commitments. They can be held accountable for moral failings, they must abide to the dictates of higher political authorities, and they must comply with laws and legislation. If the NHS funded its free health care at the point of use by embezzling money, then even if it fulfils its purpose and express commitments, it wouldn't count as trustworthy because it fails to meet a further commitment, which is both a moral and legal commitment not to steal. If scientists advance cancer treatments by conducting painful experiments on human subjects, then they too fail to meet legal and moral standards. Public organisations, then, are also committed to meeting moral, political, and legal standards.

33. It would take us too far to go through every political, legal, and moral commitment that public organisations might have. However, I will note one because I think it is a political standard that applies to all public organisations, and thus one that they can all be held accountable for. The purpose of any public organisation is, fundamentally, to serve the public interest. Different public organisations serve different aspects of the public interest, the NHS serves our collective interest in living in healthy communities, while the police force serves our collective interest in living in safe communities. Nevertheless, in all cases, the operations of these organisations are to serve the public interest in some way. This is fundamentally the purpose of any government or public organisation; to serve the interest of its citizens.

3. Conclusions – Trustworthiness & Audit

34. In this report, I have outlined a theory of public trust and distrust and organisational trustworthiness and untrustworthiness. I defined them as follows:

Public Trust in Public Organization X – If there is public trust in public organisation X, then the majority of members of the public believe that if they rely on organisation X to keep its commitments, it will keep all or most of those commitments.

Public Distrust in Public Organization X – If there is public trust in public organisation X, then the majority of members of the public believe that if they rely on organisation X to keep its commitments, it will not keep all or most of those commitments.

Organisational Trustworthiness – An organisation is trustworthy if it is both competent in keeping its commitments and judicious in selecting its commitments.

Organisational Untrustworthiness – An organisation is untrustworthy if it is either not competent in keeping its commitments or not judicious in selecting its commitments.

35. After this, I then looked at the kind of commitments that organisations have and listed four general kinds of commitments that they might have.

1. Commitments to fulfil organisational purpose(s)
2. Commitments to fulfil any expressed commitments
3. Commitment to legitimising their political authority
4. Commitments to fulfil moral, political, and legal obligations

36. In light of these observations about the nature of trust and trustworthiness follow, both for public organisations in general and the practice of public audit specifically.

37. It is important for public organisations to be clear about what their commitments are as organisations. One way to do this is to begin by considering what kinds of commitments that one has as an organisation. This report proposed an outline of the possible kinds of commitments. This process of determining the kinds of commitments organisations have is useful for enhancing one's judiciousness, which is necessary for trustworthiness. This is because the very process of understanding one's commitments and working out whether they can be competently and consistently met is itself an exercise in judiciousness.

38. The commitment approach to trust and trustworthiness can also be used as part of the process of public audit. In the case of Audit Scotland, and in many other public audit firms, the remit of auditors often extends beyond traditional financial auditors. In performance and best value audits, auditors will examine whether and to what extent public organisations meet certain commitments. It will be important for practising auditors then, to be clear about what the commitments of public organisations are when assessing whether the organisation meets those commitments. Moreover, it will be helpful for auditors to have a full account of the different commitments of public organisations in order to assess whether a failure to meet some commitment is a consequence of competition with alternative commitments. The process of such audit, with a focus on commitments and trustworthiness can also help enhance the judiciousness of auditees, since the audit process itself can help organisations determine whether auditees' failures to meet their commitments are due to organisational incompetence or a lack of judiciousness in commitment selection.

39. Being trustworthy is also about carefully selecting one's commitments. This means making sure that if one takes on a commitment, that one has the capacity and competence to deliver on the commitment. It also means ensuring that the new commitment does not undermine or conflict with another commitment. This can be difficult, especially in the context of complex organisations working together to deliver public services. Nevertheless, if public organisations and policymakers are more explicit about what their commitments are, and auditors recognise those commitments, they can help build a stronger picture of what it means for an organisation to be trustworthy.

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