

Consumer responses to new technologies

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How do consumers - as part of their everyday lives - deal with technological innovations in food production?

- The problem of increased complexity
- The challenge for consumer trust
 - The TRUSTINFOOD project

Consumers are ambivalent to new technologies

- On the one hand:
Potentials of improved predictability, health benefits, safety, quality, perhaps lower prices
 - i.e. there is a demand
- On the other hand:
Increased complexity

Increased complexity in terms of

- Advanced and heterogeneous knowledge production
- Rapid technological innovation
- An immense number of various actors involved in production and distribution

We deal with an increasing multitude of experts, fertiliser and seed companies, technology producers, big industrialised farms, an advanced processing industry, retailer chains, certification companies, public decision-makers and enforcement systems ++

- Variety of products and product information
- Standards and regulations
- The dynamics of change in itself

Some consequences ...

- ❑ The understanding of risk and safety assessments is questioned (*disputed knowledge, what is relevant, who says ++*)
- ❑ Immense amounts of knowledge, but a knowledge bias between experts and lay people
- ❑ The transparency of food production and manufacturing is reduced, in spite of formal procedures
- ❑ The tacit understanding of everyday routines is challenged - a yoghurt is not just a yoghurt, 'fresh' is not necessarily fresh

In other words: more uncertainty

Cheated or poisoned or unwarranted anxiety?

- several questions emerge, like ...

- Safety important, but what about quality, nutrition, value for money, ethics?
- Who are defining what is good for the consumers?
- In practice, how are considerations for consumers balanced against other concerns?

We cannot know for sure
- we have to "leap into uncertainty"

- A greater need of trust
- The dynamics of trust and distrust become more important
- New technologies (and market structures) will challenge established relations and forms of trust
 - from personal trust to trust in increasingly abstract systems

Consumer reactions vary

- Some don't care - proportion depending on time and place
- Individual anxiety - perhaps inability to take action
- More cautious shopping practices
- Collective responses in the market
- Political mobilisation
 - The information bias in the marketplace
 - Improved consumer protection

Even if many consumers are concerned all over Europe

There are differences in consumer trust/distrust in food between countries which often are bigger than variations between social groups within a country

® the levels and the forms of trust depend on the social context - the place and the time

Trust in Food



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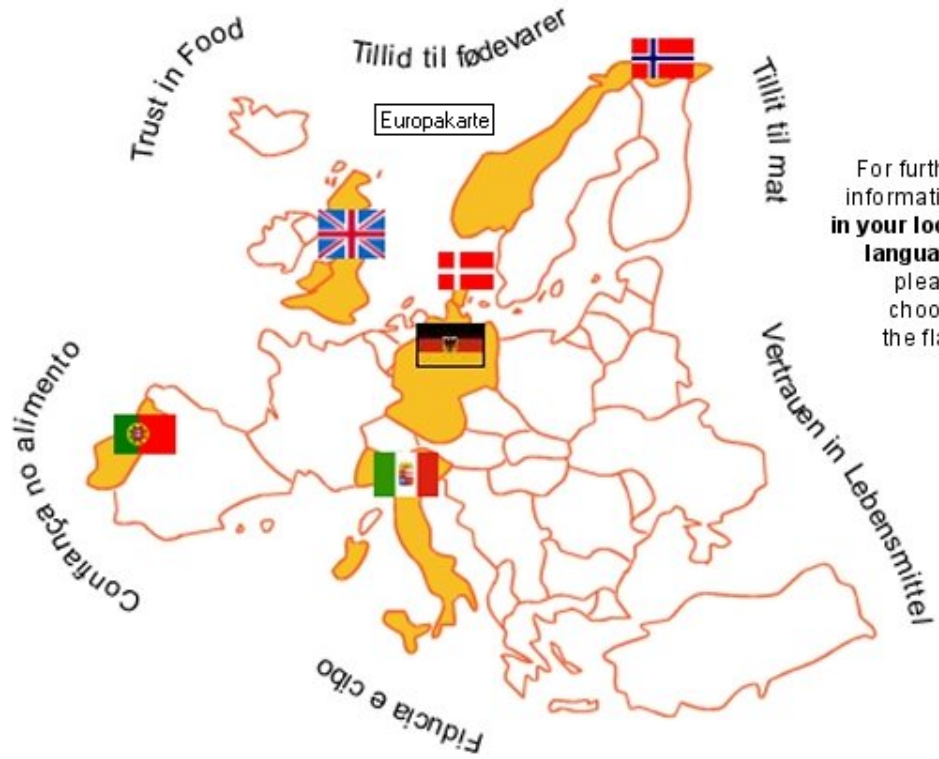
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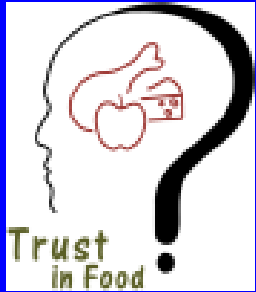
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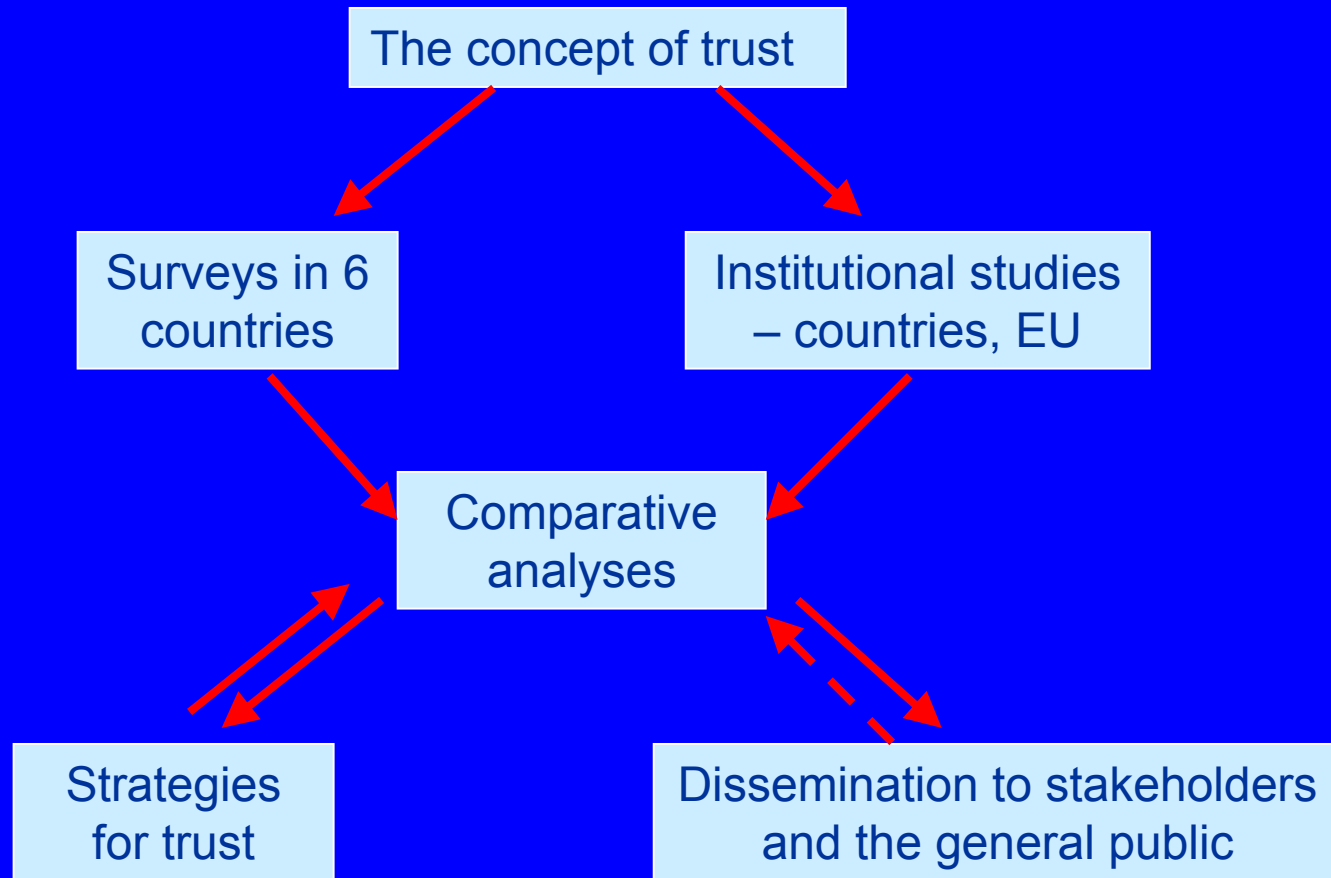
A European Study of the Social and
Institutional Conditions for the Production of Trust

<http://www.trustinfood.org/>

The overall objective is to investigate the social and institutional conditions for the production and maintenance of consumer trust in food

i.e. to identify and analyse factors that determine trust in the food supply and information sources (market actors, public authorities, experts, NGOs etc.)

The general outline of the work



Some very preliminary observations

Consumer trust in food is "a good cause", but ...

- **Trust in public consumer protection?** In spite of common EU regulations, national regulatory systems are very different in terms of organisation, priorities, etc. - and trust in them vary
- **Whom do we need to trust?** In practice, the distribution of responsibilities between different actors, public and private, vary. Big retailers, local shops, national authorities +++
- **Is consumer trust important?** Is there a real and relevant choice between products?
- **Does consumer distrust matter?** Systems to notice and to deal with consumer distrust vary. Acceptance of distrust may promote trust

Systems are needed that can deal with the challenges of

De-localised food

- Globalised R&D
- Multi-national companies
- Retailer merges and collaboration
- Ingredients of variable origins
- Multi-level regulation
- Global mobilisation (eg. Attac)

Conditions for trust are social

- Special shops or retailers
- and/or*
- Concrete labels
 - Specific authorities
 - Special networks of information
 - Certain experts +++