

## **Trust and credibility.**

### **Towards a cross-disciplinary perspective on organics combining media and management research**

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The overall purpose of the proposed paper is to approach the complex relations between consumer and organic products from respectively a media and a management perspective. Before we argue for the relevance of an interdisciplinary perspective on ecology and trust, we shall briefly introduce the two projects involved.

#### **1) Trust and Organic in media- and in management research:**

**The reviewed management research** did reveal an overwhelming concern for trust issues. However, in most studies, trust is taken for granted in a self-evident and self-explanatory manner. Moreover, the concepts of trust, credibility and trustworthiness are most often applied interchangeably. As Fielder (2011:577) rightly points out, the linguistic frequency of trust is no proof of the actual relevance of the phenomenon in praxis, a phenomenon that is vague, empirically intangible and not measurable. The review considered the relatively few studies concerned with the conceptualization of trust and with 'trust asymmetries' (Earle 2010:569) that is the question of how trust is created, maintained and/ or lost.

The point of origin for the review is that globalizing societies, markets and 'agro-food' systems are integrated in all elements of the organic supply- and value chain or ecology as located in Denmark. The review proposes that this quality of contemporary ecology is to be taken into consideration, if one wants to retain and develop green production (Rittenhofer 2012).

The number of articles that research trust at the interface of organic and is rather limited. Many studies are quantitative marketing studies that research consumer interest and with a major concern for eco-labels. They build on the assumption that trust is a major building factor in economic growth and thus of the organic sector. Management research on organic producers are absent, as is research on other links in the organic supply chain. However, the "need to trust extends to the business and market interactions throughout the supply- and value chain because at each stage the interactions are people to people" (Arnott 2007: 983). Work on trust issues related to diverse links in the supply chain does exist, but is divided by disciplinary boundaries; neither an interdisciplinary perspective on trust nor on trust related to ecology exists. Ecology is predominantly represented by and reduced to eco-labels, most often state eco-labels. Few studies are found on the work of accrediting and certifying organizations (Hatanaka 2005, 2008). Here, the presence of trust in interactions of people to people within the organization of e.g. Third Party Certifiers is briefly assumed and directs attention away from risk issues inbuilt accreditation and certification processes. A single study contrasts standardized ecology as represented by eco-labels against locally produced, chemical free foods (Moore 2006). As alternative to industrialized and standardized organic products, it suggests a new understanding of ecology: "postorganic". Overall, ecology in MANAGEMENT RESEARCH is reduced to a label economy.

**Media studies** as an international discipline are not only preoccupied with the 'old' mass media such as newspapers, radio and television. Today, they also include digital media, the Internet, and the mobile phone that have changed the patterns of media use in most of the world. A pragmatic definition of media therefore is that when a technology goes between and potentially relates two or more groups or two or more

individuals communicating, we talk about media. This definition is the foundation of media research whether the discipline is in social sciences (most parts of the world) or in the humanities as it is in Denmark. In this context this is important, because it means that also packaging, labels, and certification can be perceived as mediated communication from producers and distributors to the consumers. Media studies have traditionally been focusing on news and popular culture and entertainment. The studies of labels and packaging with text and pictures therefore are either absent or have been done on a small scale in business departments without any consideration whatsoever on the 'mediated' character of labels and packaging.

The review of media research found hardly any research in the relations between media, credibility and trust, and organic food. It did nevertheless find a number of studies on credibility and trust and on the relation between the two terms in communication and media practices, based on qualitative studies on for instance websites and user's trust in them (Hoff-Clausen 2002, 2008). Credibility is produced over time in the user of media if the producer or sender is perceived as trustworthy. Important is a performative appeal, where the character of the producer and communicator is demonstrated through consistent and positive behaviour and language (Hoff-Clausen 2008: 225). Then trust may emerge in the user.

Trust is thus not a solid value. It is established in a reciprocal process, where the ethos of the producer/sender is recognized as trustworthy and coherent with the content of the message. The users need to trust the sender or producer, because they do not know everything as the sender or producer might do. If the users knew everything about the producers and his organic food products, then they did not need to rely upon having trust in him. Thus trust (or distrust) is a symptom of a lack of knowledge. In late modern complex societies all of us need to trust producers, senders and regulators many times each day (Luhmann 1999 (1968) Giddens (1990). Rousseau and many others talk about high-trust relationships (20xx) but the question is, how the necessary reduction of complexness in relation to presentations and discussions of organic food, actually is enacted in the media?

The of review several international studies showed that it is possible to compare studies on organic food, media and consumers between countries and cultures, but not to generalize results from one country to other countries (Baker et al. 2004). The differences are too many even between the Scandinavian countries. In Denmark we have had a high growth in the consumption of organic food for many reasons (Kjaerness et al. 2007, Hjelmar 2010). It has, however, not meant much interest in media research for how credibility and trust is enacted and perceived in the media and among other users of the official Danish organic labelling system. A single study shows how diverse the English, German, Spanish, Norwegian and French consumers' conceptions of the term organic are. Nevertheless, all the interviewed consumers are completely uninformed about the background for and contents in organic labels and certifications (Aarse et al. 2004).

When organic food and labels are discussed in the media, organics are generally presented in opposition to conventional production and labelling of food (Cahill and Morley 2010; Lockie 2006). Organic production is presented in positive, but vague and "earthy", even poetic terms also when printed packages are included (Cook et al. 2009). In the media organic is good, conventional bad. Critical journalism and communication focusing on information and complex knowledge, is – seen through media research – almost absent. Cahill and Morley (2010) conclude that in US newspapers 9 out of 10 press coverage is positive. No such research exist of contemporary media in Denmark, but it is evident from a common sense perspective that the Danish picture might be even more extremely in favour of organic products, while the German case might be slightly different – but we still need empirical evidence if this is the case. All in all, credibility and trust seems to be a prior assumption in relation to organic products. And more problematic, the term organic and the ø-label seem more confusing than enlightening when consumers are asked what the label mean.

The review thus underlines the need for more research in complex relations between organic production and labelling, media, and consumer's construction of credibility and trust. 'Small' media like packaging and labels in not mentioned in Danish media research and hardly internationally. Research in the complex web of

relations between producers, consumers, and other stakeholders presented in the media is in its beginning. So work is to be done!

## 2) Why is it promising to approach organics and ecology from a combined media- and management research perspective?

The main proposition of the paper is that in order to promote ecology and contribute to green growth it is promising to combine a management (research) and a media perspective. A number of reasons for that are elaborated in the following. We then summarize the divergences and compliances of both fields and discuss how they fruitfully could be combined in order to point towards an interdisciplinary approach to ecology.

**Management research** on trust and ecology follows a combined economic- sociological logic that draws on New Institutional Economics. With reference to sociologists such as Luhmann, NIE transfers socio-psychological interpersonal trust relationships to abstract economic interrelationships. NIE builds on the assumption that all economic activity is embedded in an institutional framework of social norms, rules, cultures (Fielder 2001: 579). Few reviewed studies explicitly apply an institutional approach ( e.g. Moore 2006; Hatanaka et al. 2008; Daubjerg et al. 2008; Franz et al. 2010). Daubjerg et al. (2008:396) find that an institutional approach cannot explain the variation in organic growth.

There are limitations to management research's underlying logic: Existing trust models are of limited usefulness in "post-trust" societies where citizens no longer fully trust regulators and industry (Earle 2010:270). The potential impact of post-trust societies on ecology as a label economy of trust has not been researched. Another limitation is, that there are institutions that are not taken into consideration. Of relevance to this paper are two institutions that are widely absent in management research at the interface of organics, ecology and trust: producers (e.g. farmers), and the media. In management research, one single study on farmer's market, trust and postorganic products is found (Moore 2006). In media research, producers (including farmers, dairies and other manufacturers) are only included in one combined qualitative and quantitative research project from the UK (Cook et al. 2010). Thus, the question: 'Who does the farmer trust?' is of no concern to the reviewed media and management research concerned with ecology and trust.

### a) Media are not integrated in an institutional economy perspective on ecology

**More recent management research** states that trust is one of the major driving factors behind businesses' choice to take a step towards sustainability (Aschemann 2011:2), and Kurland & Zell (2010:229) acknowledge the influence of the entertainment industry (which controls TV, film and other media as well as trend makers) on supply chains and recognize it as an important force in socio-cultural change towards (more) sustainability. However, even though management research at the interface of trust and ecology follows an institutional economic logic, neither 'media as such', nor media products other than labels or mediation are taken into consideration. An exception is Hatanaka et al (2008:86) who state that Third Party Certification bodies are 'socially mediated institutions'.

Obviously, an important research area for media research might lie here. Nevertheless, the complexity of the question is also obvious. Our own research shows how difficult it is to isolate the influence of 'the media' and especially popular entertainment in television and on the Internet (Povlsen forthcoming 2013). Generally only few studies in media research have looked at labels and certification and only in relation to consumers' choice. A Danish study shows, that consumers' trust in the ø-label is high, but low in relation to imported organic products. An English study shows that consumers generally are skeptical towards labels and prints on packaging (Cook et al. 2009). Much more research needs to be done on the mediation of the entire supply chain, beginning with producers and ending with consumers, and including all stakeholders in between.

**b) Reductive understandings of labels are applied in both disciplines**

As stated above, **the reviewed management research** at the interface of ecology and trust is preoccupied with eco-labels. The approach is often positivistic, in the sense that eco-labels are widely conceptualized as a way that gives access to information on standards and a way to differentiate products (e.g. Sønderskov 2011). However, MANAGEMENT RESEARCH does not take into consideration that eco-labels are mediated messages. Eco-labels mediate e.g. organic standards, certifications, accreditation etc. This adds to the argument that MANAGEMENT RESEARCH produces a reductive understanding of ecology.

**Media research** has its focus on qualitative and quantitative empirical studies of media systems (laws, rules, contracts), media production (the making of the media), media contents ('texts', messages), and media reception and use (audience and user studies). Nevertheless most media research does not have a perspective on future productions or technological innovation or content development in practice. An aspect that seems highly relevant in today's media where commercialization is a must. For instance research in relation to certification or labelling has not been a prioritised area until quite recently (Cook et al. 2009; Hjelmar 2010). Hjelmar shows how the trust in the ø-label is high among Danes, but also that a general mistrust towards imported organic food is at stake. Generally, consumers highlight health, ethics and animal welfare, environmental issues, taste, and general quality and freshness. They interpret the ø-label in the direction that they are mostly interested in: Even the modern reflexive consumers are more diverse in their interests than imagined.

**c) Neither management research nor media research captures the empirical complexity of ecology**

**Management research** on trust and ecology does not capture organic complexities that arise from an increasingly complex production and certification chain and related information asymmetries. It is a limitation of management research at the interface of trust and ecology, that it shows a strong focus on labels. Another limitation is, that much of this research focuses on state labels at a point of time, where responsibility for food safety and quality and the development of standards increasingly shifts to private bodies that are independent of actors in the supply chain, buyers and governments (Hatanaka et al. 2008). A third limitation of MANAGEMENT RESEARCH on trust and ecology is the predominant focus on food (e.g. Sønderskov et al. 2011). Today, private and public labels, national and international labels, eco-labels for food and cosmetics and clothes and tourism – and the related standards – coexist. Eco-labels coexist with labels that mediate social and environmental sustainability. A fourth limitation also recognized in more recent MANAGEMENT RESEARCH (e.g. Sodano et al. 2008) is that the reviewed MANAGEMENT RESEARCH does not investigate the inter-relationships of co-existing labels and their impact on ecology. This impacts MANAGEMENT RESEARCH propositions regarding trust relationships.

**In media research**, the relation between credibility and trust is (as already mentioned) seen as a continuum with credibility at one end and trust at the other. Both poles are dependent of the media users' active reception and judgements. The media users construct and decide the credibility of the producers and media. They might produce trust as a result, but of course the sender/media/producers can influence their 'ethos' and trustworthiness in good communication practices that are coherent with their practices. With Georg Simmel, the German sociologist and philosopher, trust is a hypothesis on future behaviour and consumer choice (1992: 393). But as we have seen, trust is based on a fundamental lack of informed knowledge – with full knowledge trust is not needed but full knowledge does not get access to the media because media producers think that media users do not want it. It would of course also be impossible to get full knowledge of all complex information in late modern societies. A contemporary term like high-trust relations (Rousseau 20xx) is a consequence of complex modern societies, where we need to rely on complicated systems

(Luhmann 1999 (1968), Giddens 1990). Trust thus is in itself an effect of reduction of complexity. It furthermore seems that contemporary media users and consumers have highly individual and diverse ways to reduce their everyday complexities – also in relation to organic food and organic labels.

In an on-line survey on media use in Denmark conducted during summer 2009 (N: 1710), a few questions on media users' trust in organic food and their anxieties of additives and chemicals in food were posed along with questions on how they used media in relation to food, lifestyle and health<sup>1</sup>. 41% of the respondents bought organic food, 79% were highly interested in food and in their diet, and 66% feared for additives in food. The distrust in conventional food and additives thus is not necessarily followed by trust in organic food.

To go in depth with some of the results in the survey, in autumn 2010, 16 respondents of 66 invited respondents agreed to participate in qualitative in depth interviews. The tendencies from the survey were confirmed, but the interviews also stressed, how important media use is for our knowledge of and relations to the food, we consume. In the survey, the internet, magazines and books are important media in relation to food. But the interviews unveiled that all the respondents had underreported their media use in the survey. They perceived 'media' as TV, newspapers and radio and during the interviews, they often 'remembered' their daily media routines in relation to food. Their media routines seemed to be deeply embedded in other daily routines that it was hard for them to remember what they actually do, when and where and why. Often, we had to ask people to show us how they use their laptops during the interview, so that they and we could gain insights in their daily media routines. So that they could show us, what they normally do. In this process of media practices, they often themselves remembered their routines – especially when it came to using the internet exclamations like "Yes, of course, that is what I usually do" were often heard, because it actually is hard to remember what is done, because it is a matter of deeply embedded everyday routine. Often people also made associations to popular TV-chefs and food entertainment on television like for instance Jamie Oliver or Masterchef, when arguing, why they consume, what they do, even if they had denied watching such shows just a few minutes earlier.

Most important in this context, however, is the fact that when we asked the respondents whether they consumed organic food, six out of sixteen spontaneously declared not to believe in the "cause", while two said that they were aware that this is what they ought to do, but they did not eat organic. The consumption of organic food thus by many consumers is understood like a 'religion', that one has to believe in – in other words to trust blindly. Nevertheless, later in the interview several of the respondents 'admitted' that they routinely bought organic milk and carrots.

Education might be one explanation. Only one male engineer in his fifties vehemently disliked organic food products (filthy) – especially milk, because of the way it is produced in organic dairies,. A female nurse in her thirties mistrusted conventional production strongly and bought organic food in the Internet when it was not available in Copenhagen where she lives with her family. Another nurse in her forties living in the countryside, likes to consume organic food, but said that she often preferred locally produced conventional food and Italian conventional products bought on the Internet because of their better taste and quality. The third nurse (in her fifties), nevertheless, was very eager to promote official Danish health recommendations and did not find the organic/conventional opposition relevant for her and her family's fitness and fat regulated diet. Thus the three nurses have three different consumer profiles in relation to organic food and three different trust enactments as well.

Another explanation might be age in relation to education. Three respondents in the thirties with university degrees also show three different consumer-profiles in relation to food. Jesper (36) is a 'foodie' (Johnston and Baumann 2010). He loves to cook and to eat food, to read about food and to watch food entertainment on television. He loves high gastronomy and he also loves conventional junk food. Recently he has become the father of a son. Already during the pregnancy, the family reorganized their food

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<sup>1</sup> The survey and an interpretation of the main findings is available at [www.au.arts.dk/changing](http://www.au.arts.dk/changing) boundaries.

consumption and now exclusively buys organic food: “Luckily we have the best organic pizzeria in town just around the corner”. Rene (29) also likes to cook. He considers organic food to be of a better quality, have better taste and to be more innovative and exotic. He is not an experienced organic consumer. Zanolini and Naspetti (2002) found the same consumer profile in Italy already ten years ago. Mette (31) on the contrary eats organic food because her late mother taught her to do so. Mette is nostalgic and often cooks from her mother’s old recipes that she inherited. For Mette organic food is tradition and homeliness, for Rene it is innovative and exiting and for Jesper it is an obligation as a good middle class father – and can easily be combined with his extreme interest in food.

The qualitative material thus demonstrates how complex consumers’ motivation to buy (or not to buy) organic food was in Denmark last year – and also that their understanding of the ø-label is diverse and complex. Six of the older respondents criticized organic food and mistrusted it and disliked the quality, while most of the younger respondents trusted it and liked the quality – but for very diverse reasons. They all knew the ø-certificate, but only the older engineer had some solid information on the label and what it stands for.

The context we are moving in is thus complex and highly differentiated. The review of media research clearly shows that it is not possible to generalize media- and consumer research in one language or cultural context to others. Thus a German or French qualitative study might show other patterns or lack of patterns.

d) **Media and communication research may contribute to management research a more complex distinction between trust and credibility’**

In management research, hardly any distinction is made between ‘trust’ and ‘credibility’, both terms are applied interchangeably (Rittenhofer 2012). Trust is applied as relational category and as a phenomenon that exists in interrelationships, e.g. economic transactions. Most social science research applies a ‘consensus model’ of trust that is not tied to any particular context (Earle 2010) and that is linear and dualistic. Acknowledging the complexity of factors that impact transactions in economic interrelationships, ‘trust’ replaces a neoclassical economic assumption about ‘rationality’ as key term of economic transactions. ‘Trust’ in management research is not the opposite to ‘distrust’, but to ‘risk’ (Fielder 2001). For this reason, the paper proposes that ‘trust’ could be conceived of, not as reduction, but as a signifier or a mediator of complexity. Few researchers deal explicitly with the conceptual complexity of trust (e.g. Blomqvist 1997; Li 2007; Earle 2010).

Despite the reductive ways in which ‘trust’ often is applied in management research and at the interface to ecology, and because one can ‘read’ trust as a signifier of complexity, we propose that the ‘trust’ concept has the potential to be developed in interdisciplinary research that acknowledge complexities. A further proposition is that the split in economic logic between neoclassical ‘rationality’ and between economic-sociological ‘trust’ is resembled in the producer/ consumer divide in management research on trust and ecology, namely the strong consumer focus of this research (e.g. Thøgersen 2005; Moore 2006; Hampton 2007; Auger et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010; Gielissen 2011; Sønderskov et al. 2011) and the related absence of research of trust related to producers or other links of the supply chain such as suppliers, distributors, accreditors or certifiers.

We suggest that at the interface of ‘trust’ and ‘organic’, management research contributes to the creation of a reductive image of ecology as an economy of trust or a consumer economy. The economic discourse that widely impacts management research on organic and trust has resulted in research emphasizing the impact of non-rational ‘soft’ factors: consumer faith (Ward et al. 2004), consumer values (Moore 2006; Pivato et al. 2008), creation of knowledge that is meaningful to consumers (Franz et al. 2010), company values as impact factor of consumers purchase decisions (Hampton et al. 2007), consumer’s perception of value added (Claro et al. 2004) or the interpretation of organic purchase as an expression of consumers’ personal values (Fotopoulos et al. 2002). Within this logic of inquiry, research in the importance

of business ethics and CSR is developed – the idea that company's should be accountable to their stakeholders, e.g. to give consumers the option of 'reasoned choice' (e.g. Manning et al. 2006).

In management research trust is placed outside the social, its mere existence in relationships is a priori assumed and taken for granted. Trust is not created in, but assumed to be there and brought by the researchers to interrelationships, none of the reviewed studies are concerned with the creation and emergence of trust in and through social practices; media use could serve as an example of a social practice. These are clear indicators for that the reviewed management research does follow a logic that combines economic and sociological elements. However, the sociological trust research MANAGEMENT RESEARCH draws on is European centred and developed at the beginning of the 20th century or during the Cold War period. This would explain the dualistic and linear nature of the trust understandings in MANAGEMENT RESEARCH as well as their limited usefulness in contemporary complex, globalizing 'risk societies' that need research that does not take outset in a priori science or 'zombie' categories (Beck 2002).

The rhetorical tradition in **media and communication research** has defined credibility as equivalent with the ethos of the sender/speaker – or in our context the producer or the official label system (Bordum and Wenneberg 2003 eds.; Hoff-Clausen 2002, 2008). Only the media user that is always also a consumer can construct the credibility of the sender – or producer. If this happens, the consumer feels trust. Luhman (1999, 1968) and later Giddens (1990) shows how trust is better to reduce complexity than distrust. Labels and official certifications can facilitate the construction of trust rather than distrust. But trust is also the signifier of lack of informed knowledge and a reduction of complexity that might be too high.

#### e) Producent/ forbruger/ konsument – 'supply chain'

In management research, few attempts have been made to unify the fragmented literature and to develop an interdisciplinary conceptualization of trust (e.g. Li 2007). In the 2000s, trust "remains an undertheorized, under-researched and therefore poorly understood phenomenon" (Child 2001:275; Li 2007:421). This is due to "a narrow focus based on discipline-bounded perspectives" (Li 2007:421) There still is "little cumulative theory building" and "no integrated framework to interpret... the nature, feature, content, process, antecedent and consequence of trust" (Li 2007:421). Much MANAGEMENT RESEARCH on trust and ecology focuses on consumers and labels and applies quantitative methods.

We suggest that there is a need for a qualitative, empirical founded interdisciplinary conceptualization of trust. While some research has focused on risk, everyday and - after the BSE scandals in the UK - on media use (Lolk and Horst 2003; Tulloch and Lupton 2003), neither management nor media research has discussed risk in relation to organic products. Management research may contribute to the pursue of future interdisciplinary research some useful starting points: the concept of 'high- trust' relationships (Arnot 2007) and the conception of trust as a multidisciplinary concept (Blomqvist 2008). "Trust research suggests that high-trust business relationships are in a constant state of flux from uncertainty, complexity, specialization, information, barriers, growth, alliances and mergers, globalization, multiculturalism, litigation and so on, offering wide scope for trust research set in a global or cross cultural context" (Arnot 2007:983). This would include trust asymmetries and at the interface of the mediatization and the commercialization and diversification of media products and platforms, as a highly complex communication of any kind, including labeling and certifications, is established at this interface.

For many years, **media research** focused on content analysis in relation to the presentation of organic food in the media - often of big corpuses of media texts and contents. Recent research nevertheless shows a significantly strengthened emphasis on the reception of the media in a context of everyday life in media saturated societies with complex media user patterns. This research either is qualitative or - as the example

given in this paper - a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. This is followed by a growing interest in researching the mediation from original producers to consumers following a web of media routines embedded in daily life with limited time resources. Cook, Reed, and Twiner (2009) thus combine content analysis of advertising in the media with interviews with 16 different stakeholders. Hjelmar (2010) discusses the high Danish growth rate for organic food products in relation to the trust in ø-labels. Not surprisingly, his findings emphasize the importance of daily routines for consumers' choice. Even if the 16 respondents generally revealed a high trust in organic labels, it is their daily routines that define their consumption patterns. The routines are changeable (e.g. conventional food scandals in the media have a high impact), but over time respondents either resume daily routines, or new routines are established compromising between organic and conventional consumption. In Denmark the penetration of organic food in super market chains are high. Danish families visit maximum one food shop each day so the consumption of organic food is very dependent on the choices available in the one supermarket visited between work and home.

**f) Differences and similarities between the disciplines provide the outset for an interdisciplinary conceptualization of trust**

MANAGEMENT RESEARCH and media research a priori reduce the empirical complexity of ecology. The question arises how research within both disciplines can avoid a priori reduce complexity already in its research design. We suggest that one step in this direction is to work interdisciplinary and to e.g. combine a media- and a management perspective in order to capture some of the complexity of ecology. This conference paper is a start in this direction.

A combined interdisciplinary media- and management approach both would draw on the divergences of the two disciplines and usefully combine their respective insights in order to enrich current understandings of ecology and to develop an understanding of trust relationships that acknowledge the complexity of contemporary ecology as it would give a more differentiated view on the complexities from which the organic supply chain emerges. As potential starting point for an interdisciplinary conceptualization of 'trust', we propose to conceptualize organic complexities as a field of non-linear practice interplays from which organic ecologies emerge and in which enactments of trust emerge in media and consumer practices. A transdisciplinary approach to ecology would help transgress the disciplinary boundaries and contribute to a more holistic understanding of ecology.

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