

Contextualising consumer trust in food risk governance of avian influenza: knowing and non-knowing on UK shopping floors

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Introduction

To re-establish consumer trust following a series of food emergencies in the 1990s, EU, Member State, and private governance approaches to food safety were revised around the turn of the century. Transparent information provision to consumers is a pivotal strategy in the new approaches, finding its institutionalisation in independent bodies as the European Food Standards Agency (EFSA) and the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA), and in reinforced traceability and labelling provisions (MAFF 1998; European Commission 2000; Wales *et al.* 2006). In the UK – location of significant food crises as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in the 1990s and foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 – relatively high levels of consumer trust in food are reported from 2002 onwards (Berg 2004; Kjærnes *et al.* 2006; Wales *et al.* 2006), despite newly emerging food incidents (see e.g. Van Kleef *et al.* 2009). Are we, hence, witnessing the effectiveness of information provision as a means to elicit high levels of consumer trust?

Going back to the work of Georg Simmel, Giddens (1990) and Möllering (2001) stipulate that the prime condition for requirements of trust is lack of full information, implicating that information provision in itself cannot (fully) determine consumer trust. But what, then, constitutes high levels of consumer trust in food as present in the UK? And to what extent, and in what way do information provision and food scares impact on this? This paper argues that consumer trust in food is to an important degree constituted in the relational, situated practice of purchasing food. The paper aims to explore which elements of such practices – including consumers' dispositions, and consumers' interaction with physical settings in shops – facilitate consumer trust at the place and time that consumers enact trust through their food choices. It bases this exploration on in-store, qualitative interviews with UK consumers purchasing different types of poultry meat products in different retail-setting, just after UK avian influenza (bird flu) outbreaks.

In the following section, the conceptual framework of this study will be discussed. Next, we will briefly introduce avian influenza, and elaborate on the methodology underlying our empirical exploration. We then present the data obtained from the in-store consumer interviews, on the basis of which we will analyse constitutions of consumer trust as enacted in different purchasing practices. Finally, we will conclude with reflecting on our findings.

Trust in food in practice: a conceptual framework

Much current thinking on consumer trust in food focuses on risk communication as a key strategy to incite consumer trust. By linking trust to risk perception (Slovic 1999; Gstraunthaler and Day 2008; Mazzocchi *et al.* 2008) or to perceptions of effective risk

management practices (Van Kleef *et al.* 2009), consumer trust is essentially conceptualised as a cognitive feature. Given the impossibility to assess food risks by inspecting food products as they are offered, risk communication becomes quintessential in determining consumer trust and concomitant “informed consumer decision-making” (Dreyer *et al.* 2009, p. 7). Yet, as noted by Kjærnes (2006), successful communication is itself dependent on trust in sources of information, making trust both the condition and outcome of such communication. Moreover, since full information would annul the need to trust (Simmel [1907] 2004; Giddens 1990; Möllering 2001), information in itself cannot (fully) explain enactments of trust in ‘consumer decision-making.’ What then, instead or in addition to information, constitutes consumer trust in food?

To explore this question, this paper starts from the relational perspective that trust is required in situations when full information on consequential actions of others is lacking (Giddens 1990; Sztompka 1999; Möllering 2001; Kjærnes 2006). Bound up with the contingency of everyday life, trust differs from weak inductive knowledge serving to predict future events by entailing – in addition to such a cognitive understanding – a commitment with possibly unreliable agents (Simmel [1907] 2004; Giddens 1990). When making this trusting commitment, we enact the anticipation that actions of these agents meet our expectations, while momentarily dismissing the risk that the future will prove us wrong (Sztompka 1999; Möllering 2001). Information-based interpretations of this risk and its acceptability are often important in sustaining trust (trust is hardly ever totally blind), but such interpretations fall under the heading of inductive knowledge. Since complete knowledge would eliminate risk and the need for trust, trust necessarily entails the additional element of suspending the unknown (all trust is to some degree blind), which makes weak inductive knowledge momentarily ‘certain’ enough to support a trusting commitment (Giddens 1990; Möllering 2001). To understand consumer trust in food, hence, research should capture consumers’ expectations, interpretation of information, and the means by which consumers bracket what they do not know, concerning other actors’ dealings with food of their choice.

From the above conceptualisation, it follows that trust in food only derivatively concerns trust in food-objects themselves: fundamentally, it connotes trust in agents’ dealings with (including information provision on) food – such as those of food supply chain actors, food regulators, experts, and NGOs (Kjærnes 2006). Trust relations between consumers and these actors are mediated to an important extent at shopping floors, where system and consumer rationalities meet in the social practice of purchasing (Spaargaren 2003; Oosterveer *et al.* 2007; De Krom 2009). In-store, consumers encounter food supply and governance strategies in the present physical (material and informational) settings, enabling and constraining consumers’ food choices. Consumers, in turn, bring with them to shopping floors general background knowledge, and lifestyle- and context-specific routines of knowledge and behaviour (Reckwitz 2002), which co-determine their food choices and thus exert influence on the success of food supply and governance strategies. At the moment of food choice, which is constituted in and constitutive of this interplay, trust relations between consumers and actors having bearing on the characteristics of and information on chosen foodstuffs are manifested, as then commitments between consumers and these actors are enacted.

Trust relations can be expressed or sustained through *facework* commitments, entailing interpersonal mediation in circumstances of copresence, and *faceless* commitments, involving mediation via symbolic tokens as money or labelling arrangements (Giddens 1990). Differences in forms of mediation implicated in physical and informational settings in stores can be expected to imply differences in consumers’ interpretation of information and the concomitant suspension of non-knowing underlying consumer trust. Moreover, different types of food products (e.g. free-range organic or ‘standard’ products, processed or unprocessed) likely involve different expectations and interpretations regarding different actors’ bearings

and information on food characteristics as quality, health, animal welfare, social fairness, environmental sustainability (cf. Kjærnes 2006). Hence, it can be hypothesised that the constitution of consumer trust enacted in purchasing practices differs dependent on forms of mediation implicated in retail-settings and types of food products involved.

Belonging to the unspectacular side of consumption, food purchasing practices tend to involve much routines (Warde 1997). These include routinised trust relations, where it are “routinised practices whose comforting presence suspends the arbitrary character of reality” (Misztal 2001, p. 315). At the same time, food consumption is particularly sensitive because, unlike other forms of consumption, it entails an intimate relationship between man and nature through the act of incorporation (Oosterveer 2007). This act not only relays social interpretations of distancing and belonging, but also co-determines our bodily experiences and health (Fischler 1988; Halkier 2001). Food-related incidents as avian influenza outbreaks are, therefore, likely to serve as fateful moments (Giddens 1991), triggering a discursive rethinking of routinised food purchasing practices (Bildtgård 2008; De Krom 2009). The extent to which and reasons why fateful moments as avian influenza outbreaks incited changes in purchasing practices following such a rethinking, has been subject to empirical exploration. The operationalisation of our conceptual framework underlying this exploration will be discussed below, after a brief introduction of avian influenza.

Avian influenza: a brief introduction

In 2005, the highly pathogenic avian influenza strain ‘H5N1’ caught the European public eye as the next significant health and food-related threat facing Europe. Detected in Asia in 2003, the virus remained confined to this area until it started to spread towards Russia and Kazakhstan in July 2005, and into Europe in October 2005. From that moment onwards, multiple European countries have detected H5N1 in wild birds and poultry. The first UK H5N1 case involved a single dead wild swan in Cellardyke, Scotland, in April 2006. In February 2007, the UK experienced its first outbreak of H5N1 in poultry, in a large commercial turkey premises (from the *Bernard Matthews* company) in Suffolk.

H5N1 avian influenza is highly pathogenic and lethal for poultry. Moreover, in Asia it has caused multiple bird-to-human infections often resulting in human casualties, and experts fear that a highly fatal pandemic could commence once the virus has acquired the capacity to spread efficiently and sustainably among humans. No evidence exists that humans can become infected with avian influenza by ingesting poultry products; standard advice is that proper cooking will destroy all viruses. Direct contact with infected birds is considered the main risk factor concerning bird-to-human infections (Scientific Panel on Biological Hazards 2006; Food Standards Agency 2007).

To poultry, avian influenza is thought to spread via migratory birds (making outdoor poultry susceptible to infection via these birds), agricultural trade and human travelling (WHO 2006). The most likely route of infection to the Suffolk premises was considered to be imports of poultry meat products from Hungary (Defra 2007). To prevent virus spread, depopulation of flocks infected with either high or low pathogenic avian influenza is mandatory according to EU legislation – in cases of low pathogenic avian influenza so as to avoid mutation of low pathogenic viruses into highly pathogenic ones (Council of the European Union 2006). The Suffolk outbreak was contained by culling approximately 150,000 birds (Defra 2007).

Avian influenza was selected as a case to study UK consumer trust in food based on the following ‘fateful’ features of avian influenza outbreaks. Firstly, since experts feared that avian influenza could cause a human pandemic, it was anticipated that consumers would consider possible health risks linked to poultry products in face of UK outbreaks. Moreover, besides human health concerns, wider consumer concerns were expected to trigger a

rethinking of consumers' food purchasing practices and implicated trust relations, such as those related to food provenance (for instance in view of imported poultry meat from Hungary being the most likely source of infection in the Suffolk incident) and animal welfare (for instance due to the culling of infected flocks). Such rethinking was especially expected since causes of (potential) spread of avian influenza to the UK (wild birds and/or agricultural trade) and preferable policy measures to deal with food and agricultural risks posed by avian influenza, had been subject to considerable contestation in a UK public debate prior to the first UK H5N1 outbreak (De Krom and Oosterveer, submitted), allowing for different, inconclusive consumer interpretations of risks and desirable conduct to handle these risks.

Methodology

Following our conceptualisation of consumer trust in food as relational, mediated for an important part and enacted at shopping floors, we conducted interviews with consumers directly after the moment that they established their choice for a particular product in a particular retail setting. Practically, this entailed interviewing in supermarket alleys after consumers established their choice by putting a poultry product in their trolley or basket, or after consumers had paid for a product at a market vendor – the choice for these different retailers based on reasoning as discussed below. Starting from the perspective that knowledge is contextually embedded in the enactment of social practices, we conducted qualitative interviews so as to be able to draw upon relevant situational and contextual factors during interview sessions (Mason 2002).

Interviews were conducted from 13 to 23 June 2007. Prior to this, different avian influenza (bird flu) outbreaks had occurred within the UK. In February 2007, the UK experienced its first outbreak of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in poultry, in a large commercial turkey premises from the *Bernard Matthews* company, in Suffolk. Moreover, low pathogenic avian influenza outbreaks were detected on a small farm in Cowny, North-Wales, and on a non-commercial small-holding in Merseyside, England, both in May 2007 (Cabinet Office 2009).

To include in our sample different facework and faceless commitments involved in consumer trust in food, we selected consumers buying different types of poultry meat products in different points-of-sale. To cover points-of-sale where commitments are likely to be faceless, we interviewed in two supermarkets in which we expected to find different forms of these commitments: a superstore belonging to one of the “big four” UK supermarket chains, which primarily promotes itself by emphasising its overall low prices; and a supermarket belonging to a smaller, upmarket chain, which promotes itself by emphasising food quality and service, and its corporate social responsibility (Competition Commission 2000).

Within these supermarkets, we selected consumers buying different types of poultry meat products to cover possibly different expectations and interpretations of actors' bearings and information on food characteristics. Differentiation was based on products' distinct marketing classifications within the supermarkets, which resemble more widely applied sociological categorisations of contemporary consumer conduct (Dagevos 2005; Pellizzoni 2005). These classifications are: (i) standard, unprocessed poultry meat products; (ii) ready-to-eat poultry meat (e.g. rotisserie products); (iii) specialty products, sold with a premium based on their exceptional taste (e.g. due to added seasoning or stuffing); and (iv) products whose premium price is based on added value of the farming process, including ‘intermediary segment’ products (signifying more animal friendly production methods than those of standard products, but below free-range or organic standards), and free-range and organic products. Within the superstore, we selected consumers buying products falling within one of

the first three categories;¹ additionally, we interviewed consumers selecting Bernard Matthews products, to explore consumer trust in this brand implicated in the Suffolk outbreak. Within the upmarket supermarket, which only marketed ‘intermediary segment,’ and free-range and organic products, we distinguished between consumers opting for either outdoor reared free-range or organic poultry (which is arguably more susceptible to avian influenza infection by wild birds than poultry kept indoors), or for indoor reared intermediary segment poultry.

To cover different retailers where trust relations are likely to involve facework commitments, we selected a market vendor offering standard poultry meat products, a market vendor selling free-range organic poultry meat, and a farmer selling ‘exceptionally high quality’, ‘farm fresh’ duck meat directly to consumers at a farmers’ market.

The amount of interviews to be conducted was established during interview sessions, when interviews ceased to contribute to a further understanding of the nature of consumer trust in relation to specific retailer/product combinations. Based on this principle of ‘saturation’ (Mason 2002), we conducted a total of 46 interviews, distributed per retailer/product combination as described in Table 1. To avoid an undesirable bias in this sample, we selected consumers with different observable background variables. This resulted in the inclusion of 33 females and 19 males in our study,² ranging in age from 25 to 83, with an average age of 50.³ This sample is not meant to be quantitatively representative for UK consumers, but is considered to provide ample insight into the constitution of consumer trust in relation to specific purchasing practices (retailer/product combinations) for the explorative aim of this paper as set forth in the conceptual framework.

Product-type Shop	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Convenient</i>	<i>Specialties</i>	<i>Bernard Matthews</i>	<i>Intermediary segment</i>	<i>Free-range organic</i>
<i>Upmarket supermarket</i>	-	-	-	-	5 (5)	5 (6)
<i>Superstore</i>	6 (6)	6 (6)	4 (4)	3 (3)	-	-
<i>‘Standard’ market vendor</i>	5 (5)	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Farmers market</i>	-	-	6 (9)	-	-	-
<i>‘Organic’ market vendor</i>	-	-	-	-	-	5 (8)

Table 1: Number of interviews (and interviewees) according to retailer and types of poultry meat products

Consumers were questioned using a semi-structured interview guide. This guide dealt with: (i) consumers’ reasoning underlying their choices for products and retailers; (ii) consumers’ perspectives on who should fulfil which tasks to ensure that they can purchase foodstuffs meeting their requirements, and the degree to which, and reasons why, consumers expected these tasks to be appropriately fulfilled; and (iii) the influence of avian influenza outbreaks on consumers’ poultry meat purchasing practices and their reasoning underlying

¹ Although this supermarket offers free-range and organic poultry, the practical unavailability of consumers (willing to be interviewed on) buying this product in this store meant that no data could be obtained on this specific retailer/product combination.

² The sample includes six couples consisting of one female and one male, whom we interviewed as a couple so as to not disturb this contextual factor implicated in the shopping practice that they were involved in.

³ Five female interviewees refused to give their age, and their age could hence not be included in this calculation.

these. This guide was devised such to deal consecutively with consumers' expectations regarding chosen food products' characteristics and actors' bearings on these characteristics, consumers interpretation of information and suspension of non-knowing with regard to actors' bearings on chosen food products, and the degree to which fateful moments as avian influenza outbreaks incited changes in consumers' reasoning and behaviour. Data obtained from the interviews were set out per above-indicated interview-item and retailer/product combination. Subsequently, these data were analysed in terms of consumers' general and/or situation specific expectations, interpretations of information, and mechanisms to suspend the unknown regarding different actors' dealings with foodstuffs of their choice.

Contextualising consumer trust in food: empirical exploration

In this section, we discuss the empirical material derived from our interviews with consumers purchasing different types of poultry products in different points of sale. For reasons of space, this discussion is structured per retail-setting, while in the descriptions of data obtained in the supermarkets relevant references to product-specific consumer-attributes are included. The subparagraphs deal subsequently with interviewees' reasoning underlying their choices for retailers and products, interviewees' perspectives on which actors should fulfil which tasks to ensure that consumers can purchase foodstuffs meeting their requirements and reasons why interviewees expected these tasks to be (or not to be) appropriately fulfilled, and the influence of avian influenza outbreaks on interviewees' reasoning and purchases. After this section, we will analyse the data, followed by a concluding reflection.

Consumers purchasing with the free-range organic market vendor

Interviewees purchasing with the market vendor offering free-range organic produce, appreciated this vendor for his excellent, long-standing reputation, service ("if asked, they will do everything for us"), friendliness, the cleanliness of the shop, the perceptible 'proper' treatment of the meat, and because the vendor only sells local, free-range organic produce. This produce was liked for its flavour, texture, freshness, and freedom from pesticides, chemicals, and other 'contaminations'. Additionally, animal welfare, environmental (reducing food miles), and social (stimulating local economies) concerns, as well as detailed information from the vendor on his suppliers, were expressed as reasons to buy this produce.

All interviewees expected from food suppliers that they take primary responsibility for ensuring that foodstuffs meet consumers' requirements. Supply chain actors should communicate honestly among one another; the vendor is to provide correct information on products' origins to consumers. Interviewees inferred that this vendor supplied correct information from his good reputation, friendliness, good service, and the cleanliness of the shop. Consumers were additionally given much responsibility by interviewees, as consumers determine with their demand which products are supplied, and can choose between purchasing from either respectable or less-respectable vendors, and between buying more expensive, but "better for all" local, free-range organic produce, or cheaper, yet lower quality conventional produce. Five interviewees blamed government for stimulating imports rather than local farmers, and cheap instead of high-quality food. Three interviewees assumed that government's legislative framework and its health inspectors help to assure that food is wholesome and traceable – although health authorities would tend to enforce laws too strictly: "there is too much too politically correct in this country". NGOs, finally, are regarded as organisations adding just another layer to bureaucracy, or – according to two interviewees – commendable information providers on benefits of local produce and downsides of factory farming that unfortunately are merely "small fish in a big pond."

UK avian influenza outbreaks influenced one interviewee's purchasing behaviour. She stopped buying Bernard Matthews products for her children, because the Suffolk outbreak

made her realise how little she knew about the products' provenance: "Due to all imports, it's difficult for us to know where the meat comes from and whether it's safe. And I doubt whether Bernard Matthews itself knows where all their meat comes from." Three interviewees stated that due to lessons learned from previous food scares, they did not worry about the avian influenza outbreaks: two started to buy with this "reputable" vendor after the BSE crisis, making it unlikely that they will purchase affected meat; another thought that reorganisations in law and government following previous food scares assure that new contingencies as these outbreaks are amply dealt with. The remaining four interviewees referred to quick governmental action following the outbreaks as sufficient, making changes in their purchasing practices unnecessary. Moreover, interviewees considered that by buying only free-range organic, British or local produce – which was unaffected by avian influenza as this was considered linked to factory farming and opaque imports – they were likely to be safe.

Consumers purchasing at the farmers' market

Interviewees purchasing duck meat at the farmers' market held this meat to be tastier, cheaper and fresher than other (especially supermarkets') produce. Willingness to support local farmers and animal and environmental friendly production methods were additional important reasons to buy this meat. The farmer is regarded as a "trustable source," because local, small-scale farmers keep control over the entire food supply process – unlike supermarkets, which deal with food supply chains consisting of four to five processes that are all handled by different actors, and in which two different staff members are present at two different days. Therefore, "the farmers' market [should] not get too big; then it would change". Moreover, the fact that "the people seem very nice" was regarded as a sign of trustworthiness. As one interviewee noted: "I guess we have a level of trust that they are OK producers", as "quite little" information on the production process was presented. Based on his general idea of a farmers' market, which was corroborated by the friendly, personal atmosphere at the market, his "perception is that no farmers here have a big factory farm" and that the duck meat was free-range.

Interviewees expected from local food suppliers that they "make the best product that they can and market it." Consumers are to be discernable about which products they buy, and therewith support (local) farmers offering the best produce. Moreover, consumers should inform farmers about desired improvements in their food supply so that they can adjust this and be assured that they meet consumer demand. Herewith, farmers and consumers are to countervail the power of supermarkets, which pay unfair prices to farmers and incite declines in product quality. Government is to provide more support to local, and free-range organic farmers by means of marketing assistance, advice, standardising labels, and limiting supermarket power over suppliers. Two interviewees held independent organisations like the Soil Association responsible for setting and checking food standards, since government would fail in this respect. NGOs are, additionally, to promote niche markets and educate the public on food provenance more, or should, according to one interviewee, not interfere with consumers' free choice because "in the end it's the free market system that makes it all much stronger."

The Suffolk outbreak put one interviewee off eating chicken meat for two weeks, for the same reason as that she stopped buying beef in face of BSE: fear that her child would fall sick from consuming affected meat. Because chicken is a versatile staple food, and because British meat is "the best in the world" since government learned from previous contingencies (BSE and foot-and-mouth disease), she decided to start buying – only British – poultry meat again. The remaining interviewees indicated that the Suffolk outbreak reinforced their reasoning on food issues: since this incident was related to imports, processed meat, and

intensive poultry rearing practices, their choices to buy only local or British, little processed products from free-range farmers, meant they were on the safe side. Moreover, interviewees vested trust in government's ability to monitor animal health properly, and for responding adequately to contingencies, as demonstrated with the swift culls in response to the Suffolk outbreak.

Consumers purchasing with the standard market vendor

Interviewees visiting the market vendor offering standard poultry meat products purchased this meat because it is lean, easy to prepare, part of their varied diet, and liked by family members. The vendor's products were especially appreciated for being cheaper, fresher, and containing less chemicals than supermarket products. Additional reasons to visit this vendor were the nice atmosphere on the market, acquaintance with the vendor (which is impossible in supermarkets where "you can't trust what you are buying"), the vendor's personal service, and the fact that the market stall was the only place where an interviewee – who normally prefers to buy free-range products – could find the chicken product needed for a special recipe.

Interviewees overall held government to a large degree responsible for assuring foodstuffs meet their requirements by regularly controlling whether vendors abide to health and safety regulation. Interviewees knew this vendor was regularly inspected due to inspection certificates displayed in the stall, or held health and safety agencies to be "strong in this country – stronger than ever" as became evident when an interviewee was closely inspected when supplying food to elderly as a volunteer. One interviewee, however, feared that government protects businesses, not consumers, and therefore preferred buying free-range organic produce that is free from chemicals and hence safer. Shops are held responsible for choosing and treating meat well; consumers for being on their guard by keeping an eye on how clean a butcher is and if meat has not gone bad, for boycotting retailers or products they disapprove of, or for complaining to food suppliers if something is wrong – although "most don't do much". NGOs are regarded either as welcome additional guardians of food standards and independent sources of information for consumers and government, or – according to one interviewee – as animal welfare campaigners that annoyingly interfere with his free-choice.

Avian influenza did not affect interviewees' purchasing practices. Three interviewees linked avian influenza to imports and they "don't tend to buy meat that comes from abroad", or linked avian influenza exclusively to Bernard Matthews and had never bought these products. One interviewee argued that "if you worry about avian influenza, BSE... you cannot eat anything anymore." Moreover, this interviewee had person-based "confidence in what they have here. If it's infected, they won't bring it onto the market." The remaining interviewee held that government has good control over chicken farms, and that even if poultry is infected, good cooking will kill the virus.

Consumers purchasing in the superstore

Interviewees visiting the superstore belonging to one of the 'big four' UK supermarket chains opted for this supermarket because it provides good value for money, has a large variety of products, or "is the nearest supermarket" to interviewees' homes. Interviewees selecting standard poultry meat appreciated the products' low price, freshness, taste, texture, and colour; two interviewees bought it to please their (grand)children. Interviewees selecting convenient products found these products tastier than other poultry products available in the store, lacked time to cook, or were simply "too lazy to cook." Those purchasing poultry meat specialties acclaimed these products' excellent flavour, agreeable price, and the easiness to prepare the products. Interviewees purchasing Bernard Matthews products, finally,

appreciated their “reasonable” price and low calorie levels, or aimed to please family members for whom they “always keep it in the fridge, that’s a habit.”

All interviewees argued that the supermarket and its suppliers are to a large degree responsible for assuring that foodstuffs meet consumers’ requirements. These actors should provide accurate information on products’ provenance: “due to the food scares...we need to know how [the animal] is reared, and where – the country of origin.” Products should preferably be nationally or locally sourced, so that UK and local economies are supported, and food safety can be assured through well-functioning traceability mechanisms. Supermarkets should, moreover, guarantee that its suppliers meet applicable standards, and assure that shelved products remain up to standard. Failing to do so results in court cases damaging the supermarket’s reputation, as when the supermarket neglected one of these tasks recently; the supermarket will therefore avoid a repetition of history by learning from this mistake, interviewees argued.

Nine out of 16 interviewees – five buying standard products, two buying convenient meat, two buying specialities, and one buying a Bernard Matthews product – held government responsible for upgrading animal welfare standards, for forestalling monopolisation of supermarkets over producers, and for stamping out animal disease. Moreover, government should inspect if food is up to standards, and inform the public swiftly on contingencies – like it did recently, when the supermarket was taken to court. The remaining interviewees thought of government as “crap, you cannot trust it”, as ‘red tape,’ or held governmental intervention to be redundant because the prospect of “a hell of a lawsuit” will deter supermarkets from failing to meet “edible standards.” NGOs were regarded as welcome additional watchdogs of food suppliers and independent information providers to consumers, or were given no responsibility because interviewees never thought about this issue before, or because NGOs “already have too much on their hands.” Consumers, finally, should handle purchased meats hygienically. Moreover, consumers should buy what they like. Herewith, they may punish or reward retailers and influence what is on retailers’ shelves. Consumers’ influence is, however, limited according to most interviewees: consumers “should vote with our feet, but I do not do so either,” or simply “don’t know what goes on behind the scenes,” making it impossible to make an informed choice. In this view, it is up to the supermarket’s marketing department: “if they get us to buy it, they are doing a good job.” Other interviewees, however, argued that consumers “can tell the quality of a chicken by looking at it” and can check information on packages and follow the news, allowing them to make an informed vote with their feet.

Six interviewees – four buying standard poultry products, one buying specialty meat, and one buying a Bernard Matthews product – altered their consumption patterns in reaction to the Suffolk avian influenza outbreak. They either lowered the amount of times that they bought poultry products, or stopped buying Bernard Matthews products. Reasons were that the outbreak was “big news, so a scare emerged” which made them doubt if poultry meat was up to food safety standards, or that the outbreak “makes you think about what is going on in poultry production.” In the latter case, interviewees felt betrayed because Bernard Matthews’ turkey meat was not purely British while they believed it was, or heard about Bernard Matthews’ “bad practices, its poor animal welfare standards” which they did not want to support. Once interviewees heard in the media that the outbreak was contained, or when coverage on the outbreak “died down,” they started to buy poultry meat with normal frequencies again. Four of them, however, permanently refrained from buying Bernard Matthews products, because “you just don’t know if it’s okay,” or to avoid supporting bad practices or being betrayed again.

The remaining interviewees did not alter their consumption patterns in face of avian influenza. Reasons to continue consuming poultry as normal were: (i) the supermarket will not sell unsafe produce, for reasons discussed above; (ii) government reacted quickly by

culling infected poultry and avoiding that affected meat would enter the food chain; (iii) news media and officials had not reported any “nearby” problems with avian influenza; (iv) the outbreak only hit turkeys and interviewees never bought turkey meat; v) the “believe [that] you cannot get it from eating;” (vi) consumers lack any control over avian influenza, making changes in consumption patterns futile; or (vii) interviewees’ general dispositions: “I am an optimist, you know: you catch it if you do. I do not worry. Everybody dies;” and: “You hear so much about what should worry you, but I don’t want to be paranoid. Then you can’t live anymore.”

Consumers purchasing in the upmarket supermarket

Interviewees visiting the upmarket supermarket esteemed this store as “ethically sound,” because it supports high animal welfare standards and local farmers and suppliers, instead of only its profits. Additional reasons to shop in this supermarket were its proximity to interviewees’ homes, and – for one interviewee – appreciation of its broad aisles, giving him room to manoeuvre “like the free-range chickens have.” Interviewees purchasing intermediary segment products acclaimed the products’ freshness, leanness, reduced price, or selected this product type “because the animal is less ill-treated, I am led to believe” and “well-treated animals taste better.” One interviewee aimed to meet animal welfare concerns based on ‘humanitarian’ reasons. All interviewees purchasing free range or organic poultry meat expressed such humanitarian animal welfare concerns. Moreover, they appreciated that these products were locally sourced, which would help assure the products’ freshness, and allowed consumers to limit their carbon footprints and to support local farmers “who have been hit hard after foot-and-mouth.” Additional reasons to opt for these products were their taste that beats that of non-free range or organic products, their reduced price, and the amount of meat in a package suiting a meal for two.

Interviewees held the supermarket responsible for assuring that its shelves only contain safe produce, for regularly inspecting its suppliers via farm visits, and for supplying “what they say they supply.” Interviewees purchasing free-range or organic products additionally stressed the supermarkets’ responsibility for sourcing locally with farmers producing in an animal and environmental friendly manner, and for paying these farmers a fair price: “[this supermarket chain] is expensive, so they have to deliver on ethics.” Perceptions that the supermarket fulfils these roles well were based on positive media coverage on the supermarket chain, and on ideas about the supermarket’s self-interest: “if a product needs to be taken off the shelves, it is their problem. They cannot fail to inform people, because people will then lose confidence.” One interviewee with a food allergy, moreover, experienced that this supermarket meticulously labels all product-ingredients, unlike other supermarkets.

Five interviewees – two purchasing intermediary segment products, three purchasing free-range or organic – held government responsible for laying down hygiene standards and monitoring food suppliers, which would be warranted by independent bodies as the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Two interviewees buying free-range or organic products held government responsible for issuing tighter animal welfare and environmental legislation. The remaining interviewees took issue with government because “we are living in a nanny-state” that may well turn into “the boy crying wolf,” held government to be too “money-oriented” to contribute to improved animal welfare and environmental standards, preferred a free market system without government involvement, or had no idea what government could or should do. NGOs should ideally keep an independent eye on food suppliers and government, inform consumers on malversations, and raise public awareness about the drawbacks of intensive farming. However, little can be expected from NGOs because they fight an ‘uphill battle’ against government and big

corporations. Consumers, finally, should treat bought meat well, and vote with their feet by selecting products and retailers carefully: “we try and buy natural food ... organic when we can. But the trouble is that you never know what actually is going on. I believe that would be OK with [this supermarket], but other outlets may not be so fair.”

Four interviewees (two buying an intermediary segment product, and two buying free-range chicken meat) altered their consumption patterns following UK avian influenza outbreaks. Three of them stopped eating poultry meat in response to the highly and low pathogenic outbreaks “to be on the safe side, as with every scare.” They resumed eating poultry meat again once government lifted contingency measures. Yet, as the Suffolk outbreak originated from imports and intensive farming practices, they decided to carefully “choose the right place to shop” - such as this and another upmarket retailer that both source locally and score high on food quality and animal welfare issues. The fourth interviewee, on the other hand, eagerly bought Bernard Matthews products discounted after the Suffolk outbreak because government responsibly mass-slaughtered all infected animals, supermarkets will not offer unsafe products to avoid reputation damage, and the supermarket informed him that well-cooked poultry is safe to eat.

The remaining interviewees did not alter their purchasing patterns in face of avian influenza. Those purchasing intermediary segment products held that fear for legal action and reputation damage dissuades supermarkets from retailing ‘contaminated’ products. Moreover, two of these interviewees indicated to have never bought Bernard Matthews anyway. Interviewees purchasing free-range and organic produce argued that avian influenza was “a lot of scaremongering,” and that “the chance to die by being hit by a care is bigger” than the chance to die from avian influenza. Moreover, these interviewees held their choices for products (which excluded Bernard Matthews products) and retailers to be an extra safeguard: “It is the duty of farmers to handle animals well, so I try to buy from suppliers that I think will be good;” “I want to know what is in it, so I don’t buy processed meat;” and when “so many birds are kept in a small place, every disease will become an epidemic” whereas free-range birds are considered to be more resistant to diseases.

Consumer trust in food: knowing and non-knowing on shopping floors

In the conceptual framework, we defined consumer trust in food as the set of consumers’ expectations, interpretation of information, and suspension of what they do not know, concerning other actors’ dealings with food of their choice. These elements are, we argued, to an important degree mediated at shopping floors where system and consumer rationalities meet in the social practice of consuming, in the enactment of which differences in types of food products and in forms of faceless or facework commitments involved are likely to entail differences in constitutions of consumer trust. In this paragraph, we analyse the above-discussed empirical data on the basis of this conceptual framework.

As apparent in the discussion of the empirical material, interviewees’ food choices and related expectations concerning social actors’ dealings with foodstuffs of their choice, tended to be partly rooted in their general background knowledge and lifestyle-specific routines of knowledge and behaviour. These included conceptions of overall favourable dietary patterns based on understandings and concerns about one’s health, taste, food quality, the environment, animal welfare, social equity etc., as well as routinised incorporations of products in purchasing practices (such as due to the versatility of the UK staple food of chicken meat, or to please family members). Additionally, context-specific factors as interviewees’ daily schedules (whether they had much time to shop or had to fit in shopping between other chores), the event for which food was bought (daily supper or a meal for which a special recipe was selected), and the way in which food was offered (the physical lay-out and atmosphere of points-of-sale, the amount of meat in a package, discounts), co-determined

interviewees' food choices and related expectations regarding actors' conduct. Accordingly, rather than concentrating on individual consumers, whose actual store and food choices depend on many different aspects, we focus in this analysis on the constitution of consumer trust in relation to particular purchasing practices, located in specific spaces and times, and involving interaction with the present material and interpersonal settings.

In these purchasing practices, interviewees tended to expect from retailers, and to a lesser extent from farmers and other food supply chain actors, that they take up primary responsibility for assuring that consumers can purchase foodstuffs that meet their requirements. This responsibility principally involves supplying safe and high quality produce that is up to applicable standards, and fair communication on products' provenance towards consumers. Based on the empirical material, two distinct trust mechanisms on the basis of which interviewees anticipated that food suppliers perform these tasks appropriately can be discerned.

Firstly, interviewees perceiving to have relatively much control over the characteristics and availability of food products of their choice, and as such in relations with food supply chain actors having bearing and supplying information on these products, were relatively much inclined to vest trust directly in these actors. Perceptions of having such control were, on the one hand, based on interpretations of information about retailer-characteristics. These interpretations could be rooted in mediation via facework commitments, as where interviewees indicated to (co-)determine their choices for retailers and their products on directly perceptible conduct of vendors (friendliness, meat handling, cleanliness of shops), on person-based reputations of vendors, or on appreciation of interpersonal, reciprocal relationships (personal service by vendors, consumer support for specific vendors or other food suppliers through purchases, interpersonal information exchange). Moreover, interpretations of having such control could be based on faceless mediation, as where interviewees opted for 'ethical' retailers offering only products labelled and priced as premium produce, or where interviewees held that retailers operating in the free-market system cannot fail to offer produce that is up to applicable standards, since such failure equals loss of consumer satisfaction and hence loss of clientele, turning availability of produce into a token of absence of risk. Besides via interpretation of such retailer-characteristics, interviewees' perceptions of control were based on their selection of specific product types, as when premium, free-range or organic, British or local, or unprocessed foodstuffs were purchased so as to meet specific concerns and expectations of food supply actors' conduct as discussed below.

In cases of such mediation through retailer- and product characteristics, and particularly when combinations of these mediations were present, interviewees' experience of control inclined them to infer trustworthiness of food supply actors, without much reference to third-party involvement. Whereas such inferences were partly information-based (personal experience, information on food provenance supplied by personnel or via labels, etc.), they were additionally much 'informed' by heuristics on the basis of which interviewees suspended what they did not know. These heuristics were that the trustworthiness of food supply actors in distant places and times can be extrapolated from in-store frames of reference (cf. Goffman 1974); that retailers' self-interest to retain consumer trust incites them to deliver only produce that justifies consumers' trust; that the corporeal chain from farm to fork of free-range organic produce allows for confluences of high levels of animal health and welfare, environmental sustainability, and food safety and quality (cf. Buller and Morris 2003); that British or local food provenance implicates good traceability, benevolence of food supply chain actors, (nationally or locally based) social equity, and high levels of food safety and quality, animal health and welfare, and environmental sustainability (cf. Weatherell *et al.* 2003); that the smaller number of actors involved in food supply processes, the better food

risks are controlled; or that unprocessed products allows one to sensory determine ‘what is in it.’

This trust mechanism (co-)explains the overall limited impact of avian influenza outbreaks on different interviewees’ purchasing patterns and reasoning underlying these. With the highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak in Suffolk as main frame of reference, which involved intensively reared turkey, a foreign source of infection, and processed products, different interviewees regarded avian influenza as a confirmation of, or a trigger to adopt, aforementioned heuristics on free-range organic, British or local, and unprocessed produce. Moreover, interviewees inferred from the Suffolk incident that avian influenza-related risks were restricted in the UK to a specific brand or species, entailing that they would be on the ‘safe side’ by refraining from purchasing Bernard Matthews products or turkey meat. Finally, different interviewees held that choosing to purchase with ‘reputable’ retailers warrants trust that chosen foodstuffs are safe, or that retailers’ self-interest to retain clientele, and hence consumer trust, implicated that they would not deliver risky foodstuffs. As such, perceptions of control in relations with food supply chain actors, based on interrelated interpretations of information and suspensions of uncertainty as mediated via retailer and product characteristics, (co-)constituted trust in food products in face of avian influenza outbreaks.⁴

The second trust mechanism on the basis of which interviewees anticipated that food suppliers conduct would meet their expectations was discerned among interviewees who perceived to have relatively little control over the characteristics and availability of food products, in (relative) absence of experiences of above-discussed forms of facework or faceless commitments with food supply actors. Experiencing relatively little control, these interviewees tended to rely more on faceless trust arrangements involving third-party mediation. Such mediation concerned governmental agencies’ legislative, monitoring, and information provision activities, the functioning of the judicial system, and (to a lesser extent) information provision and monitoring activities by NGOs. Interpretations that these third parties’ activities meets interviewees’ expectations (and hence that food suppliers’ bearing on food products of their choice meets their expectations) could be based on in-store information provision (display of inspection certificates), or inferred from information on past proper conduct (such as that the superstore was taken to court, or personal experience of governmental agencies’ functioning). Yet, oftentimes interviewees did not refer to information related to specific cases or actions on which they based such interpretations. Rather, they bracketed lack of knowing about such specific information based on more general notions connoting “organised distrust” (Kjærnes 2006), as where interviewees indicated to vest trust in governmental agencies and NGOs due to their independence, or where interviewees referred to lessons learned from previous food emergencies as institutionalised in reorganisations of government and legislation, as reasons to enact trust in (British) food. As such, consumer trust was often not so much based on interpretation of information on specific cases or actions, but was rather embedded in conceptions of institutionalised relations between food suppliers and third parties, and how these ‘materialise’ in characteristics of foodstuffs.⁵

⁴ The fact that some interviewees changed consumption patterns away from Bernard Matthews produce, after feeling betrayed (and thus having lacked control over characteristics of chosen foodstuffs) since this produce would not have a totally British provenance while they thought it had, to stop supporting animal keeping practices that consumers had never wanted to support, or to be on the safe side, indicates that this trust mechanism, albeit involving bracketing of unknowns, is not unconditional. Rather, as inherent in trust, it involves continuous interpretation of whether expectations are met.

⁵ In this light, remarks made by consumers as that government is ‘too politically correct,’ and that NGOs are just adding another layer to bureaucracy, are not to be simply dismissed as expressions of distrust in such actors, but may instead express conceptions of ‘organised distrust’ in food risk governance, and as such incite trust.

In face of avian influenza outbreaks, this mechanism (co-)constituted different interviewees' trust in chosen foodstuffs. Notably, information about the relatively quick containment of these outbreaks due to mass-culling of infected poultry after the Suffolk incident, as well as information that avian influenza cannot be transmitted through consumption and that well-cooked poultry is safe to eat, were mentioned as reasons to continue one's routine poultry meat purchasing patterns – or even specifically purchase products discounted after the Suffolk outbreak. Additionally, however, interviewees did often not interpret information on avian influenza separately, but linked avian influenza to other incidents as BSE and foot-and-mouth disease, and the institutional handling of these. Based on such linkages, different interviewees suspended unknowns about the handling of avian influenza outbreaks, as where they indicated that because government has institutionalised lessons from incidents with these diseases, British food would be safer than ever before.

Apart from these two trust mechanisms, arguably a separate category of reasoning underlying consumption patterns can be distinguished, involving ideas as that worrying about all alleged food risks would make one paranoid and then 'you can't live anymore', while worrying is redundant since "everybody dies." Interviewees expressing such reasoning seem to (partly) retreat into the adaptive reaction to risks that Giddens (1990) termed 'pragmatic acceptance,' which implicates that since "much that goes on in the modern world is outside anyone's control... temporary gains are all that can be planned or hoped for" (p. 135). In absence of expectations or interpretation of information concerning actors bearings on foodstuffs, this reasoning seems to totally bracket the existence of risks rather than constitute trust in food. Yet, whether such reasoning exclusively underlies interviewees' dealing with uncertainties implicated in food risks, or is instead an additional means to bracket unknowns connected to above-discussed trust mechanisms (for instance, by linking this reasoning to attempts to tap into a little bit of controllability left in the modern world, or by coining it to conceptions of checks and balances institutionalised in food risk governance on the basis of which chances to actually die from food accidents are considered small) remains speculation on the basis of our empirical data involving few interviewees expressing such reasoning, and provides an interesting topic for further research.

Reflection

In this paper, we aimed to explore consumer trust in terms of consumers' expectations, interpretation of information, and the means by which consumers bracket what they do not know, concerning other actors' dealings with food of their choice. We discerned two distinct trust mechanisms on the basis of which UK consumers enacting different purchasing practices anticipated that actors' bearings on characteristics of foodstuffs of their choice meet their expectations. In these mechanisms, interpretation of information, both as regards retailer and product characteristics, and on third actors' performance and the nature of food risks, plays an important role. Notably, when asked about the impact of avian influenza on their food choices and reasoning underlying these, different interviewees referred to specific information on governmental activities or the nature of human health risks related to avian influenza, denoting the significance of food risk communication (and quick and efficient governmental reactions to contain the risk) in view of food-related incidents. However, consumer trust was additionally found to be much 'informed' by heuristics on the basis of which consumers bracketed the unknown, involving inferences from perceptible retailer and product characteristics, and from conceptions of institutionalised checks and balances in food supply and governance systems (including regarding information provision). As such, interrelations of interpretations of information and means to suspend the unknown implicated in the two trust mechanisms co-determined the relatively high degree of stability in consumers purchasing patterns in face of avian influenza, and of trust relations related to these purchases.

Given the scope of our empirical exploration, findings regarding the specific content of interviewees' expectations, interpretations of information and means to suspend the unknown are likely to be limited in their generalisability. Research in other countries, and in relation to other food-related incidents, is likely to result in different findings of such content, due to for instance differences in forms of institutionalisation of food risk governance, differences in consumers' expectations of desirable conduct of actors having bearing on food products, and different context-specificities of incidents. Yet, based on the inclusion in our sample of consumers enacting diverse purchasing practices, involving wide ranges of faceless and facework commitments and types of food products, it can be expected that the two trust mechanisms discerned in this study are constitutive of trust relations in different (country- and food incident-specific) contexts as well. Research on whether this is indeed the case, and on how trust relations embedded in these mechanisms can be further facilitated is pertinent, since a focus on food risk communication alone misses defining features of consumer trust: the interrelated interpretation of information and bracketing of uncertainty in the situated enactment of consumer trust in food.

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