

When Everyone Pays the Price:

Collective Reputation and the Spread of Distrust in Professional Communities

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of collective reputation and the mechanisms through which distrust spreads within professional communities. Although modern legal systems are based on the principle of individual responsibility, in social and administrative practice the consequences of individual actions often extend beyond personal accountability and affect organizations, professional networks, and individuals who were not involved in the original event.

Drawing upon theories of trust, professional identification, and institutional memory, the study explores how individual misconduct can evolve into a source of collective reputational consequences. Particular attention is devoted to journalism as a profession that depends heavily on public trust, as well as to various forms of professional status verification, including accreditation systems, professional credentials, and recommendation mechanisms.

The article argues that collective distrust often emerges not from formal collective responsibility but from accumulated institutional experience and organizational efforts to reduce perceived risks. It concludes that maintaining a balance between legitimate consideration of past experience and the right of individuals to be evaluated on the basis of their own actions and professional qualifications remains an essential challenge for modern professional communities.

The study may be of interest to researchers of trust, journalism, professional communities, civil society organizations, and institutional systems of professional identification.

Keywords: collective reputation, trust, distrust, professional identification, journalism, institutional memory, social capital, professional communities, institutional trust, reputational risk.

1. Introduction

Trust is among the most important social resources in contemporary society.¹ It serves as the foundation of professional interaction, public cooperation, economic relations, and the functioning of institutions. In most situations, people make decisions not only on the basis of personal experience but also according to the reputation of organizations, professional communities, and social groups with which they interact. For this reason, trust rarely exists solely at the individual level.² It is formed, accumulated, and transmitted through broader networks of social relationships.

Reputation represents one of the most significant forms of such trust. A positive reputation develops gradually and requires a long-term demonstration of reliability, competence, and predictability. At the same time, trust can be lost much more quickly. A single conflict, mistake, or controversial decision may be sufficient to cast doubt not only on the actions of a particular individual but also on the organization, professional community, or institutional system of which that person is a part.

Modern legal systems are built upon the principle of individual responsibility. Individuals are expected to answer only for their own actions, and assessments of their conduct are presumed to be based on specific facts and circumstances. In practice, however, this principle is not always fully realized. Reputational consequences often extend far beyond the formal boundaries of personal responsibility. As a result, distrust may affect individuals and organizations that have no direct connection to the original event.

Such processes are particularly visible in professional communities whose activities depend heavily on public trust. Journalism, academic research, expert networks, civic organizations, and non-state systems of professional identification all rely on recognition of their legitimacy by society and by their professional peers. For this reason, reputational crises frequently affect not only the direct participants in a controversy but also a much broader circle of people connected to the same professional environment.

Despite the importance of this issue, the mechanisms through which collective distrust spreads remain relatively understudied outside specific disciplinary contexts. Existing scholarship has examined social capital, institutional trust, professional reputation, and organizational legitimacy in considerable detail. Far less attention has been devoted to the process by which the actions of individual actors come to be perceived as characteristics of entire organizations or professional communities.

¹ Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press.

² Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.

The author's interest in this topic emerged from long-term observation of professional media communities, systems of professional identification, and the practical consequences of reputational controversies affecting individuals who had no direct connection to the original events.

The purpose of this article is to examine the mechanisms through which collective reputation is formed and distrust spreads within professional environments. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between individual responsibility and collective reputational consequences, the role of professional identification, the influence of institutional memory, and the challenge of preserving the principle of individual assessment within complex social and professional systems.

The article proceeds from the assumption that collective distrust emerges not only as a consequence of specific violations or conflicts but also as a result of accumulated institutional experience, organizational efforts to reduce risk, and the tendency to rely on past events when making new decisions. In this sense, the study of collective reputation is relevant not only to sociology, journalism, and trust studies but also to a broader understanding of how contemporary professional communities function.

2. Why Distrust Spreads Faster Than Trust

Most people intuitively understand the value of a good reputation. It helps individuals find employment, attract partners, obtain recommendations, and build long-term relationships. Far less attention is paid, however, to the fact that trust and distrust develop according to fundamentally different dynamics.

Trust requires time. It is built gradually through a series of small confirmations. A person keeps promises, fulfills obligations, and demonstrates professional competence. Each individual action rarely leaves a strong impression on its own. Over time, however, these actions accumulate and create a stable perception of reliability.

Distrust follows a different logic. It does not require a long history. In many cases, a single event is enough to place years of positive reputation under scrutiny. This is not merely a consequence of human emotions. Distrust also serves a practical function.

Under conditions of uncertainty, people seek to avoid risk. A mistake in assessing the reliability of a partner, colleague, or institution can be costly. As a result, information suggesting a potential threat often attracts more attention than evidence of ordinary and successful interaction. News that an organization has operated responsibly for many years rarely attracts significant interest. Information about a violation, however, immediately becomes noteworthy.

The same principle applies to administrative and governmental institutions. Any system of oversight is primarily designed to identify irregularities and prevent future problems. Judges,

regulators, compliance officers, and security personnel are expected to consider potential risks. Consequently, negative information often carries greater weight than a long history of successful cooperation.

Over time, an interesting effect emerges. A single incident begins to be viewed not as an isolated exception but as a possible indication of a broader problem. Additional questions arise. Greater attention is directed toward related individuals and organizations. Circumstances that previously attracted little interest become subjects of scrutiny. Suspicion gradually extends beyond the original event.

It is important to recognize that such reactions are not necessarily the result of prejudice or bad faith. In many cases, they represent a natural protective mechanism. Organizations seek to minimize risk and rely on available experience when doing so. The problem arises when caution gradually evolves into a persistent distrust of individuals who have no connection to the original misconduct.

It is at this point that the transition from individual assessment to collective judgment begins. Formally, responsibility remains personal. In practice, however, the consequences begin to affect a much wider circle of people. Reputational damage extends beyond the individual and spreads to colleagues, organizations, and professional communities.

This creates a contradiction that is rarely discussed directly. Modern legal systems are based on the principle of individual responsibility. Yet the mechanisms through which trust and distrust develop operate according to a different logic. They can draw into the consequences of another person's actions individuals who never participated in the disputed events and, in many cases, were not even aware of them.

This contradiction lies at the heart of many processes that can be observed in professional life, public affairs, and administrative decision-making. Understanding how distrust spreads beyond the boundaries of individual responsibility is therefore essential for understanding the broader dynamics of collective reputation.

3. Collective Reputation as an Invisible Asset

When discussing reputation, most people tend to think of it as a quality belonging to a specific individual. We speak of the reputation of a politician, journalist, researcher, entrepreneur, or public official. In reality, however, reputation rarely exists exclusively at the individual level.

Over time, every organization develops its own reputation, independent of the personal qualities of its individual members. A person may never meet the leadership of a university, a newsroom, or a civic organization and still hold a fairly definite opinion about that institution. Such perceptions are shaped by publications, personal experience, the views of others, and the organization's broader history.

In this sense, reputation can be understood as a form of social capital.³ It does not appear on financial statements and cannot be measured in accounting terms, yet its value is difficult to overestimate. Reputation often determines whether people are willing to cooperate, trust recommendations, accept expert opinions, or support new initiatives.

One of the defining features of collective reputation is that it belongs to many people simultaneously. No single journalist can create the reputation of a media organization on his or her own. No individual researcher can single-handedly establish the authority of an academic school. Even the most influential leader remains part of a larger system in which the efforts of numerous participants gradually contribute to a shared reputation.

For this reason, collective reputation is far more vulnerable than it may initially appear. It is built through the combined efforts of many individuals, yet it can be damaged by the actions of a single participant. Moreover, the resulting harm is rarely distributed in proportion to each person's contribution. The consequences are often borne by individuals who had no involvement whatsoever in the event that triggered the problem.

This dynamic is particularly visible in professional communities where recommendations and mutual trust play a significant role. When a specialist receives support from a respected organization, initial trust is based not only on that person's own achievements. It is also influenced by the reputation of the institution willing to recognize or endorse that professional status. The same mechanism works in reverse. When doubts arise regarding the conduct of one participant, questions may emerge about the reliability of the entire system through which professional status is granted and recognized.

Such processes can be observed across a wide range of fields. In academia, they emerge around research teams and collaborative publications. In business, they are reflected in the relationship between corporate brands and the actions of individual employees. In journalism, they affect news organizations, professional associations, and systems of accreditation. In civil society, they influence trust in organizations and the people who represent them.

At first glance, the spread of reputational consequences beyond the individual level may appear unfair. Yet it is nearly impossible to eliminate completely. Individuals and institutions constantly make decisions under conditions of incomplete information.⁴ As a result, they rely not only on facts relating to a specific person but also on broader perceptions of the environment from which that person comes.

This creates a certain duality. On the one hand, organizations seek to expand their professional networks, develop new initiatives, and attract new participants. On the other hand, the larger a professional network becomes, the more difficult it is to oversee the actions of every individual

³ Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*.

⁴ Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and Power*.

within it. As professional communities grow, so does the likelihood that the actions of a single participant will eventually affect the reputation of everyone else.

Collective reputation is therefore both a valuable asset and a permanent source of risk. As long as a system functions successfully, this risk remains largely invisible. It becomes noticeable only when someone else's mistake unexpectedly turns into a problem for dozens of individuals who had no direct connection to it.

4. From Individual Responsibility to Collective Distrust

One of the most important achievements of modern legal culture is the principle of individual responsibility. People are held accountable for their own actions, intentions, and decisions. Responsibility cannot be inherited, transferred to relatives, colleagues, or associates, or imposed on entire groups because of the actions of a single individual. This principle distinguishes the rule of law from more archaic forms of social organization in which the misconduct of one person could affect entire families, communities, or social classes.

At the level of formal law, this principle is rarely questioned today. In everyday life, however, people often encounter a different reality.

Trust does not operate according to legal rules.⁵ It develops through a different process. While responsibility has clearly defined boundaries, distrust often has none. Once it emerges, it begins to seek additional confirmation of its own legitimacy. Attention gradually shifts from a specific act to a person's environment, professional relationships, organizational affiliations, and personal history.

Interestingly, this process rarely occurs in a conscious or deliberate manner. Few people would openly admit that their perception of an individual has changed because of the actions of a colleague, former associate, or another member of the same professional community. More often, the change manifests itself in subtle ways. Additional questions are asked. Documents receive closer scrutiny. Circumstances that previously attracted little attention become subjects of investigation. Formally, attitudes remain neutral, yet the level of trust has already changed.

Such shifts become particularly visible when decisions must be made quickly and available information is limited. The less that is known about a person, the more important indirect indicators become.⁶ The organization the individual represents, the people with whom he or she

⁵ Sztompka, P. (1999). *Trust: A Sociological Theory*.

⁶ Shapiro, S. P. (1987). The Social Control of Impersonal Trust.

has worked, the projects in which he or she has participated, and the recommendations received all acquire greater significance.

As a result, a chain reaction often develops. Initial doubts are directed at a specific individual. Questions are then extended to colleagues and associates. Attention subsequently shifts to the organization itself. If the situation attracts broader public attention, the consequences may eventually affect individuals who never interacted with the original source of concern and may not even belong to the same immediate professional circle.

History provides numerous examples of this process. Following corporate scandals, investors frequently become more cautious toward entire industries. After cases of academic misconduct are exposed, oversight of research teams often increases. When professional status is abused, additional scrutiny may be directed toward others who hold similar credentials. Although each case has its own causes and circumstances, the underlying pattern remains remarkably consistent.

It is important to recognize that collective distrust does not always arise from prejudice or bad intentions. In many situations, it emerges as a byproduct of efforts to reduce risk. People seek to learn from experience. Organizations attempt to avoid repeating past mistakes. Administrative institutions develop procedures designed to prevent familiar problems from recurring. For this reason, the mechanisms through which distrust spreads often become embedded within decision-making processes themselves.

The paradox is that measures intended to increase reliability and security can simultaneously create new forms of unfairness. The more actively a system seeks to protect itself from negative experiences, the greater the risk that the consequences of those experiences will affect individuals who had no connection to the original event.

As professional networks continue to expand, this issue becomes increasingly important. Modern professionals rarely operate in isolation. Their work is connected to news organizations, research teams, civic initiatives, expert platforms, and professional associations. Each of these connections creates new opportunities, but it also increases vulnerability to the consequences of decisions made by others.

At this point, the central question of this study emerges. If collective distrust is not an accidental phenomenon but a predictable outcome of social and administrative processes, how can professional communities protect their collective reputation? And is it possible to preserve the principle of individual responsibility in a world where trust itself is formed collectively?

5. Professional Communities as Zones of Elevated Reputational Risk

As modern society becomes increasingly complex, various forms of professional association play an ever more significant role. Individuals rarely act entirely on their own behalf. Journalists work within news organizations or collaborate with media platforms. Researchers participate in

academic teams. Experts belong to professional associations. Civic activists represent organizations or projects. Even independent entrepreneurs inevitably become part of broader professional and business networks.

These associations perform important functions.⁷ They facilitate the exchange of knowledge, the accumulation of experience, the development of professional standards, and the creation of mechanisms of mutual trust. As a result, new participants can integrate into professional environments more efficiently, while external observers gain additional reference points for assessing competence and reliability.

Yet every form of collective reputation has a less visible side.

The greater the significance of professional affiliation, the more likely it becomes that individuals will be affected by the actions of others within the same community. Reputational risks tend to spread much more broadly than formal responsibility.

This phenomenon is particularly visible in journalism. The work of the media depends fundamentally on public trust in the source of information.⁸ Readers rarely have the opportunity to independently verify every published statement. Consequently, trust develops not only toward individual journalists but also toward the newsroom as a whole. A mistake made by one reporter may damage the reputation of an entire publication. In turn, problems affecting one media outlet may influence perceptions of journalists who had no involvement in the disputed material but work within a similar professional environment.

Comparable dynamics can also be observed in academic research. Scientific knowledge depends on trust in processes of review, publication, and verification. When it becomes known that a researcher has falsified data or violated standards of academic integrity, the consequences often extend far beyond that person's individual reputation. Questions arise regarding co-authors, supervisors, research centers, and journals that published the work. In some cases, projects unrelated to the original misconduct may also come under scrutiny.

An even more complex situation can emerge within civic organizations and professional associations. Unlike governmental institutions, such organizations often possess limited oversight powers. Their activities depend heavily on trust among participants and on voluntary compliance with shared rules. The larger an organization becomes, the more difficult it is to monitor the actions of every individual using its name, symbols, or professional resources.

Over time, a contradiction emerges that is rarely discussed openly. Every organization seeks to expand its influence and attract new participants. Yet each expansion simultaneously increases the probability that the actions of a single individual may affect the reputation of the entire

⁷ Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

⁸ Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The Elements of Journalism*.

structure. In this way, organizational success can itself become a source of reputational vulnerability.

Particularly important within this framework are various mechanisms of professional identification. Press credentials, accreditations, membership cards, professional registries, recommendation letters, and other forms of status verification exist in nearly every professional field. Their primary purpose is to facilitate interaction and reduce the time required to assess competence and professional affiliation. Ironically, however, these very instruments often become subjects of scrutiny once a controversy arises.

The reason is straightforward. When an individual abuses trust, observers begin asking not only about that person's conduct but also about the mechanism that granted access to a particular professional status. Gradually, discussion shifts away from the individual and toward the broader system of professional recognition. Questions arise regarding admission procedures, selection criteria, and the effectiveness of internal oversight.

Professional communities therefore occupy a unique position. On the one hand, they require mechanisms of trust in order to function effectively. On the other hand, those same mechanisms become especially vulnerable once controversy emerges. The more heavily a community depends on trust, the more painful the consequences of losing it.

For this reason, questions of collective reputation should not be viewed solely as matters of ethics or social psychology. For many professional communities, reputation directly affects their ability to perform their core functions. The erosion of trust gradually becomes a practical limitation that may affect even those members whose professionalism and integrity have never been questioned.

6. The Mechanism of the Spread of Collective Distrust

In most cases, distrust spreads gradually. It is rare to observe a situation in which attitudes toward an entire organization change overnight. More commonly, the process unfolds through a series of stages, each of which appears reasonable and even justified on its own. For this reason, the development of collective distrust often goes unnoticed while it is taking place.

The process usually begins with a specific event. This may involve a violation of rules, an abuse of authority, the dissemination of inaccurate information, the misuse of professional status, or any other action that raises concerns among observers. At this stage, attention remains focused exclusively on a particular individual and the circumstances surrounding that person's conduct.

The next stage involves the search for explanations. People are rarely satisfied with simply acknowledging that a violation has occurred. There is a natural desire to understand why it happened. Why was it possible? Who was aware of the situation? Why was the problem not detected earlier? At this point, attention begins to extend beyond the original incident.

Gradually, the scope of inquiry expands. Investigators examine professional connections, organizational affiliations, personal histories, recommendations, and the individuals who confirmed or supported the person's status. On its face, such an expansion of inquiry appears entirely reasonable. Yet it is precisely at this stage that the first risk emerges: distrust begins to spread to people who had no involvement in the original event.

Attention then shifts toward the broader system of which the individual was a part. If the problem occurred within an organization, the organization itself becomes a subject of scrutiny. If the controversy concerns professional status, questions arise regarding the procedures through which that status was obtained. If a professional association is involved, observers begin examining its internal standards, admission processes, and oversight mechanisms.

A defining characteristic of this stage is that the focus is no longer the behavior of a particular individual but the reliability of the system itself. Importantly, no one may explicitly claim that other participants acted improperly. The mere existence of doubt is often sufficient to redirect attention toward a much wider circle of people.

Over time, such situations contribute to what may be described as institutional memory. Every organization, administrative body, and professional community accumulates experience from past events. Decisions made in one context become reference points for future decisions. Previous problems continue to influence the assessment of new situations long after the original participants have left the scene.

Institutional memory is what makes collective distrust particularly durable. Reputational consequences frequently outlive the events that produced them. People change. Leadership changes. Organizations evolve. Years pass. Yet perceptions of risk remain and continue to influence future decisions.

Sometimes this influence takes subtle forms. No explicit accusations are made. No formal restrictions are imposed. Instead, additional reviews appear, more detailed questions are asked, greater attention is paid to documentation, and decision-makers seek more evidence than would previously have been required.

Individually, such measures may seem insignificant. Collectively, however, they create a new reality for those associated with a particular professional environment. Individuals find themselves spending more time proving their credibility, explaining their activities, and overcoming barriers that did not exist before the original incident occurred.

One of the most striking aspects of this process is that the people affected by it often have no knowledge of its origins. An individual may encounter heightened scrutiny or additional requirements without realizing that these obstacles stem from events that occurred years earlier and involved people he or she has never met.

For this reason, collective distrust should not be viewed merely as an emotional reaction to isolated misconduct. To a significant extent, it is the product of accumulated institutional experience. This helps explain why the consequences of individual events often prove far more enduring than commonly assumed. They continue to influence decision-making long after the original controversy has disappeared from public attention.

Understanding this mechanism is particularly important for professional communities whose activities depend heavily on trust. The sooner an organization recognizes the possibility of such processes, the greater its chances of protecting its reputation and reducing unnecessary risks for individuals who have acted in good faith.

7. Journalism as an Environment of Heightened Reputational Vulnerability

Among the many professional fields that depend on trust, journalism occupies a unique position. Unlike most other professions, its principal resource cannot be measured in financial terms, employee numbers, or material assets. The most valuable asset of any media organization is public trust.

Readers purchase newspapers, visit news websites, or watch reports not because they personally know the author of a particular story. In most cases, they know nothing about the journalist who prepared the material. Their willingness to trust the information is based primarily on the reputation of the news organization that has been built over years of work. It is this accumulated reputation that allows audiences to regard information as credible and worthy of attention.

At the same time, this very characteristic makes journalism one of the most vulnerable professional environments. A newsroom's reputation is built collectively, yet it can be damaged by the actions of a single individual.

The history of journalism contains numerous examples in which a single inaccurate report, fabricated story, or ethical violation created long-lasting reputational problems for an entire publication.⁹ Moreover, the consequences rarely remain confined to a single newsroom. Distrust often spreads much further.

Another distinctive feature of journalism is that professional activity does not always fit neatly within rigid administrative structures. In many countries, media organizations rely not only on full-time staff but also on freelance contributors, special correspondents, columnists, documentary filmmakers, citizen journalists, bloggers, and independent researchers. Their involvement may be continuous or occasional, and their relationships with media organizations are often not defined by conventional employment arrangements.

⁹ Zelizer, B. (2004). *Taking Journalism Seriously: News and the Academy*.

For this reason, journalism has historically developed its own mechanisms of professional identification. Press cards, editorial credentials, accreditations, letters of assignment, and other forms of status verification exist throughout the world. Their purpose is relatively straightforward. They help establish a person's connection to a media organization or professional community and facilitate interaction with event organizers, public institutions, and information sources.

Under normal circumstances, such mechanisms attract little attention. Problems arise when individuals begin using their professional status outside the context for which it was originally intended. In such situations, discussion quickly shifts from the actions of the individual to the system that granted the status in the first place.

From an outside perspective, this reaction may appear understandable. If someone abuses trust, it is natural to ask how that person gained access to the system. Yet this approach inevitably creates additional risks for journalists and media organizations that acted entirely in good faith. Attention gradually moves away from the specific violation and toward the organization itself. Questions may arise regarding accreditation procedures, admission criteria, editorial standards, and even the legitimacy of the professional activities conducted by the newsroom.

These dynamics are especially visible in relation to independent and non-state media organizations. Large governmental or corporate media institutions often possess substantial reserves of institutional credibility supported by extensive resources and long histories of operation. Independent media outlets operate under different conditions. Their reputation is far more dependent on the conduct of individual participants.

For this reason, questions of collective reputation have practical rather than merely theoretical significance in journalism. A newsroom's ability to maintain professional standards and respond effectively to controversies influences not only its public standing but also the professional opportunities available to everyone associated with it, both now and in the future.

The paradox is that the development of journalism requires openness and the inclusion of new participants. Contemporary media increasingly rely on freelance contributors, citizen journalists, outside experts, and members of diverse professional communities. This openness enriches the information environment and broadens public discourse. At the same time, it inevitably increases reputational risk. The larger the professional network becomes, the more difficult it is to oversee the actions of every individual within it.

As a result, journalism remains one of the clearest examples of the tension between individual responsibility and collective reputation. Formally, each person is accountable only for his or her own actions. In practice, however, the consequences of individual conduct can affect a much wider group of people and shape perceptions of the professional environment as a whole.

8. Professional Credentials and the Problem of the Subsequent Use of Status

Particularly revealing in this context are the various forms of professional identification that exist in modern society. Across virtually all professional fields, there are mechanisms designed to confirm an individual's affiliation with a particular professional environment. These may include membership cards issued by professional associations, press credentials, expert certificates, accreditations, recommendation letters, and other forms of professional recognition.

As a rule, such documents are created to address practical needs. They help establish a person's relationship with an organization, facilitate professional interaction, and provide access to events, information, or professional resources.

At the moment a credential is issued, the relationship between the organization and the recipient usually appears straightforward. The organization confirms that a particular connection exists at the time the decision is made. What happens to that status afterward, however, is often beyond the organization's control.

Throughout the history of professional associations, civic initiatives, and professional projects, numerous situations have arisen in which the original purpose of a credential or accreditation later diverged from the way it was subsequently used.¹⁰ Individuals have relied upon a recognized professional status in circumstances that were never anticipated when the document was issued. In many cases, the organization itself became aware of such use only after the fact.

From the perspective of collective reputation, these situations are especially significant. Questions are directed not only at the individual who made a particular decision but also at the broader system of professional recognition. Attention gradually shifts from individual conduct to admission procedures, selection criteria, and oversight mechanisms.

This creates a complex dilemma. On the one hand, society has a legitimate interest in the reliability of professional institutions. On the other hand, no organization can realistically control every future action of a person after professional status has been granted. As a result, professional communities are sometimes expected to bear responsibility for circumstances that lie beyond their actual capacity to supervise or influence.

This contradiction becomes particularly visible in an era of increasing mobility. Individuals change countries of residence, professions, fields of activity, and professional networks. Credentials and forms of identification issued in one context may later be used in entirely different circumstances, sometimes many years after they were originally granted. Consequently, the connection between the organization's initial decision and an individual's later actions becomes increasingly indirect.

¹⁰ Leonov, I. (2026, February 18). *RUPASS as a Non-State Professional Identification System: Institutional Trust Formation and Administrative Resistance in a High-Regulation Migration Regime*. SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6265998>

At the same time, such situations provide valuable insight into the nature of collective distrust. The more society relies on mechanisms of professional verification, the greater the likelihood that isolated instances of controversial use will be interpreted as characteristics of the entire system. Under these conditions, the central task of professional communities is not to promise absolute infallibility but to establish transparent procedures that clearly distinguish the actions of a particular individual from the activities of the organization itself.

This example illustrates that problems of collective reputation do not arise solely from violations of rules. In many cases, they emerge from the gap between the actual limits of an organization's responsibility and public expectations regarding how far that responsibility should extend.

9. Professional Identification and the Limits of Organizational Responsibility

Virtually every profession relies on mechanisms that distinguish members of a professional community from those who are not affiliated with it. Without such mechanisms, it would be difficult to sustain professional environments, transfer knowledge and experience, or maintain common standards of practice.

Different professions address this challenge in different ways. Some rely on government licensing systems. Others depend on membership in professional associations. In many fields, professional status is confirmed through certifications, registries, accreditations, recommendation letters, or similar forms of recognition. Despite the diversity of procedures, their purpose remains essentially the same. They help society understand that a particular individual is genuinely engaged in a specific professional activity.

It is important to recognize that no system of professional identification can fully guarantee the integrity of its participants. Even the most rigorous selection procedures cannot predict every future action an individual may take. An organization may evaluate qualifications, experience, and compliance with established requirements, but it cannot control every decision that person will make months or years after obtaining a particular status.

In practice, this reality is often overlooked. When a controversy arises, public attention frequently seeks not only the immediate actor but also the institution that once recognized that person's professional affiliation. The logic behind this reaction is understandable. If someone was granted a particular status, questions naturally arise regarding the reliability of the process through which it was obtained.

Yet this is precisely where an important distinction must be made. Confirmation of professional affiliation is not a guarantee of future conduct.¹¹ A newsroom may verify that an individual

¹¹ Leonov, I. (2026, January 19). *Amerpass as a Non-State System of Transnational Professional Identification: Conceptual, Institutional and Ethical-Legal Foundations*. SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6246498>

collaborates with a media organization. A research institution may confirm participation in a project. A professional association may recognize that a specialist satisfies established standards. None of these institutions, however, can assume responsibility for every future action of every person connected to them.

The issue becomes even more complicated as professional relationships grow increasingly flexible. Individuals often participate in multiple projects simultaneously, cooperate with different organizations, and work across various countries and professional environments. Traditional notions of fixed organizational affiliation are gradually giving way to network-based forms of professional interaction. Under such conditions, attempts to hold an organization responsible for every action of every participant become increasingly unrealistic.

Nevertheless, public and administrative practice often moves in precisely this direction. When a dispute emerges, attention tends to focus not only on the individual involved but also on the procedures through which that person entered a professional environment. Questions arise concerning selection criteria, oversight mechanisms, and internal standards. In some cases, such questions are entirely justified. In others, they extend far beyond the specific incident and begin to shape perceptions of the organization as a whole.

Non-governmental organizations are particularly vulnerable in this respect. Unlike state institutions, they rarely possess the resources necessary to maintain continuous oversight of all participants. Their activities depend largely on professional trust and voluntary compliance with shared norms. For this reason, the consequences of isolated violations can have a disproportionately strong impact on their reputation.

This situation creates a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, professional communities seek openness, growth, and the inclusion of new participants. They aim to expand opportunities, develop new initiatives, and strengthen professional networks. On the other hand, every expansion increases the likelihood that the actions of a single individual may influence perceptions of the entire system.

As social and professional networks continue to grow in complexity, this contradiction is likely to become even more visible. The question of where organizational responsibility begins and ends extends far beyond individual disputes. At its core, it concerns the search for a balance between maintaining trust in professional institutions and preserving the principle of individual responsibility, without which no modern society can function fairly.

Perhaps this is where one of the most important boundaries must be drawn. An organization can be responsible for the quality of its procedures. It can be responsible for the transparency of its rules and the integrity of its decisions. It cannot, however, be responsible for every action of every person who has ever been part of its professional environment. Ignoring this distinction inevitably contributes to the growth of collective distrust, the consequences of which often extend far beyond the original incident.

10. Institutional Memory: Why Old Stories Continue to Influence New Decisions

Every organization possesses a memory.¹² This concept extends far beyond documents, archives, or databases. Institutional memory exists within procedures, established practices, decision-making patterns, and even the professional culture of those who work within an organization. It is through this memory that accumulated experience is preserved and past mistakes are less likely to be repeated.

At first glance, such memory appears entirely beneficial. It is difficult to imagine an effective institution that begins each new decision-making process as though no previous experience existed. Government agencies take previous reviews into account. Companies analyze past failures. Professional associations revise internal procedures after controversial incidents. In this way, organizations learn, adapt, and evolve.

Yet along with useful experience, institutions also retain the consequences of past conflicts. One of the defining characteristics of institutional memory is that it rarely preserves details indefinitely. Over time, circumstances fade, participants change, and documents are archived. What often remains is not the full story itself but the conclusion that was drawn from it.

This helps explain why people frequently encounter the consequences of events they have never heard about. They join an organization, participate in a project, or enter a professional field without realizing that certain rules, restrictions, or attitudes were shaped long before their arrival.

Such processes can be observed almost everywhere. In business, new employees follow procedures that originated in response to crises long forgotten by most of the organization. Government institutions continue to apply policies that were introduced to address violations from previous decades. Professional communities maintain restrictions whose original rationale is no longer widely understood.

A particularly significant feature of institutional memory is its tendency to focus on negative experience.¹³ Successful operations are usually perceived as normal and rarely generate new procedures. Conflicts, violations, and crises, by contrast, often prompt organizations to develop additional safeguards. As a result, institutional memory gradually becomes populated primarily by stories of risk.

¹² Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*.

¹³ Rothstein, B. (2005). *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust*.

Over time, these stories begin to shape a distinctive view of reality. Stable assumptions emerge regarding potential threats, problematic areas of activity, and situations believed to require heightened oversight. Such assumptions are not necessarily incorrect. The difficulty lies elsewhere. They often survive far longer than the circumstances that originally gave rise to them.

Within professional environments, this can lead to unexpected consequences. An organization may have completely revised its internal procedures. Its membership may have changed entirely. The conditions that once caused concern may no longer exist. Nevertheless, perceptions of the organization continue to be influenced by events that occurred many years earlier. In effect, reputation begins to develop a life of its own, increasingly detached from present realities.

This mechanism becomes particularly visible wherever decisions depend upon assessments of reliability, integrity, or trustworthiness. In such contexts, past experience is treated as a source of information about future risk. Even when the connection between historical events and present circumstances is tenuous, the possibility of repeating previous problems encourages institutions to act with caution.

In this way, one of the most enduring forms of collective distrust emerges. Its source is no longer the conduct of a specific individual or even the current activities of an organization. Instead, it is rooted in institutional memory itself. The people affected by the consequences of that memory often have no connection whatsoever to the original event.

For professional communities, understanding this mechanism is essential. Reputation is shaped not only by present behavior but also by the accumulated history of interactions with the outside world. Protecting collective reputation therefore requires more than adherence to current standards. It also demands ongoing engagement with institutional history. Otherwise, past conflicts may continue to influence perceptions long after the original reasons for distrust have disappeared.

11. The Cost of Other People's Mistakes

Up to a certain point, collective distrust may appear to be an abstract concept. It is relatively easy to discuss it in terms of organizations, professional communities, or administrative procedures. Yet every reputational process ultimately affects real people. For this reason, the issue of collective reputation cannot be reduced solely to questions of management or public perception.

Behind every instance of spreading distrust lie human consequences.

An individual may never violate any rules and may perform his or her work with professionalism and integrity. Such a person may possess an excellent professional reputation, years of successful experience, and strong recommendations. Nevertheless, there may come a moment when that individual is forced to answer questions that arose not because of personal actions, but because of the actions of others.

At first, these consequences may seem minor. Additional document reviews. Requests for further evidence. Longer processing times. Increased attention to details of a professional background. Considered separately, such circumstances rarely appear to be a serious problem.

Over time, however, their cumulative effect begins to alter a person's professional trajectory.

Additional barriers require time, resources, and emotional energy. Individuals find themselves repeatedly explaining circumstances unrelated to their own conduct. They are placed in a position where they must demonstrate not only their own integrity but also their lack of involvement in the actions of others.

Such situations are particularly difficult for those who have devoted years to building their professional reputation. Their expectation is simple: they should be evaluated according to their own achievements, decisions, and conduct. When attention shifts instead toward the actions of others or toward conflicts from the past, individuals may experience a sense of losing control over their own professional future.

These consequences rarely appear in official statistics. They cannot easily be measured through court decisions, administrative rulings, or financial indicators. Nevertheless, they can have a substantial impact on careers, professional mobility, and opportunities for advancement.

The situation becomes even more complex for new members of a professional community. Individuals who join an organization after reputational problems have already emerged often inherit a portion of the distrust accumulated before their arrival. They bear consequences without having had any opportunity to influence the events that created them.

In many respects, this may be the most troubling consequence of collective distrust. The issue is no longer whether an organization deserves criticism for past mistakes. The question becomes whether it is reasonable to extend the consequences of those mistakes to a new generation of participants who had no involvement in the original events.

Over time, such processes can produce another important effect. People begin avoiding organizations and projects that are perceived as reputationally risky. Importantly, this may occur even when no actual problems exist. A persistent perception of potential difficulty is often sufficient. As a result, collective distrust begins to influence the development of professional communities by limiting the arrival of new participants and reducing opportunities for growth.

What makes these processes particularly concerning is that they often unfold gradually and almost invisibly. Organizations continue to operate. Projects continue to move forward. No formal prohibitions are imposed. Yet opportunities slowly narrow. Some doors open less readily than before. Certain decisions take longer. Certain questions are asked more frequently.

On the surface, everything appears to be a matter of ordinary caution. Yet it is through these seemingly minor manifestations that the true cost of other people's mistakes becomes visible.

The more heavily a profession depends on trust, the higher this cost tends to be. For a journalist, it may take the form of increased scrutiny regarding professional status. For a researcher, it may involve greater skepticism toward publications and professional affiliations. For a civic activist, it may require constant efforts to demonstrate the integrity of the organization being represented. For a young professional, it may mean the loss of opportunities whose existence was never even apparent.

For this reason, the problem of collective reputation cannot be viewed solely as a question of fairness or public morality. It is also a mechanism that shapes the distribution of opportunities within professional environments. As long as the consequences of one person's actions continue to affect those who had no involvement in them, the question of where collective distrust begins and where it should end will remain relevant across professions, institutions, and societies.

12. The Spread of Reputational Consequences Beyond Individual Responsibility

The problem examined in this article is not limited to any particular profession or country. Mechanisms of collective distrust can be observed across a wide range of social environments. Although the circumstances differ from case to case, the underlying pattern often remains remarkably similar. Attention initially focuses on a specific individual or organization, yet over time the consequences begin to affect a much broader circle of people. The histories of journalism, academia, and business provide numerous examples that illustrate this process in practice.

A particularly revealing example is the case of American journalist Jayson Blair, who worked for *The New York Times*. In 2003, it was discovered that he had systematically published stories containing fabricated facts, inaccurate quotations, and instances of plagiarism. Formally, responsibility rested with Blair himself. The consequences, however, quickly extended beyond his personal reputation. Questions were raised about the editorial procedures of one of the world's most respected newspapers. A large internal investigation followed, senior newsroom leadership resigned, and the incident became a lasting subject of discussion within the journalism profession. Public attention shifted from the actions of a single reporter to the reliability of the entire editorial oversight system.¹⁴

A similar pattern can be observed in academia. In the early 2010s, the case of Dutch social psychologist Diederik Stapel attracted widespread attention. Investigations revealed that he had falsified research data over a period of many years, and those data had been used in dozens of academic publications. The consequences affected far more than the individual researcher. Co-authors, doctoral students, university departments, and academic journals associated with the work came under scrutiny. In many instances, previously accepted studies had to be reexamined.

¹⁴ Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The Elements of Journalism*.

Although the misconduct was committed by a single individual, its reputational consequences spread throughout a much larger segment of the academic community.¹⁵

A comparable situation emerged following the corporate scandal involving Enron. Once extensive financial manipulation was exposed, questions were directed not only at the company's executives but also at auditing firms, investment advisers, financial analysts, and even the broader system of corporate oversight. As a result, numerous procedures governing financial reporting and internal supervision were reconsidered and revised. The actions of a relatively small group of individuals ultimately influenced the regulation of an entire sector of the economy.¹⁶

Each of these examples demonstrates the same underlying pattern. An individual incident becomes the starting point for a broader inquiry. Attention then shifts toward oversight procedures and the professional environment in which the incident occurred. Distrust gradually spreads to individuals and organizations that were not directly involved in the original events. At this stage, an individual problem is transformed into a collective one.

These examples do not suggest that caution is inherently misguided. Many important safeguards and oversight mechanisms emerged precisely because institutions learned from such incidents. At the same time, these cases illustrate how narrow the boundary can be between a reasonable assessment of risk and the extension of distrust to people who had no connection to the original misconduct.

For this reason, the problem of collective reputation remains relevant far beyond any particular profession. It reflects a fundamental social mechanism that becomes visible whenever past experience begins to shape the evaluation of new people, new organizations, and new circumstances.

13. Can Collective Reputation Be Protected?

Sooner or later, every professional community confronts a difficult question for which there is no simple answer: can an organization fully protect its reputation from the actions of individual participants?

Experience suggests that no universal solution exists. It is impossible to design a system of rules that completely eliminates mistakes, misconduct, or abuses of trust. Every organization works with people and therefore inevitably encounters the full range of human behavior. Attempts to

¹⁵ Levell, W. J. M., Noort, E., & Drenth, P. J. D. (2012). *Flawed Science: The Fraudulent Research Practices of Social Psychologist Diederik Stapel*.

¹⁶ McLean, B., & Elkind, P. (2003). *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*.

create a perfectly secure system often result in excessive bureaucracy, reduced efficiency, and the erosion of the very atmosphere of trust that the system was intended to preserve.

Nevertheless, there are mechanisms that can significantly reduce the impact of such situations.

The first of these is transparency. The clearer an organization's principles, procedures, and decision-making processes are, the easier it becomes to distinguish the actions of a particular individual from the activities of the organization as a whole. When admission criteria, internal rules, and professional standards remain visible and understandable, external observers are better equipped to evaluate the actual circumstances surrounding a controversy.

Equally important is the preservation of institutional records. Many professional communities devote considerable attention to their current activities while paying much less attention to documenting their own history. Yet archives, publications, reports, event records, and other forms of documentation often become the most important evidence of an organization's good faith years after a dispute has occurred.

A further factor is the ability of an organization to respond promptly and openly when problems arise. Ignoring obvious misconduct rarely helps preserve trust. On the contrary, a lack of response is often interpreted as indirect evidence that the problem is systemic. A far more effective approach involves acknowledging difficulties openly and demonstrating a willingness to address them.

At the same time, organizations must avoid the opposite extreme. Some attempt to protect their reputation by distancing themselves from every controversial situation. The result can be an atmosphere of distrust within the professional community itself. Colleagues begin to view one another not as partners but as potential sources of risk. Such an environment may ultimately cause more damage than the original incident.

Protecting collective reputation therefore requires a delicate balance. Organizations must maintain professional standards and respond appropriately to violations. At the same time, they must remain committed to the principle of individual responsibility. Otherwise, efforts to combat the consequences of collective distrust may end up reproducing the very mechanisms they seek to overcome.

Particular attention should also be paid to institutional history. Many professional communities prefer to forget past conflicts, assuming that the passage of time will resolve the problem on its own. Experience suggests otherwise. Informational vacuums rarely remain empty. If an organization does not explain its own history, others will do so in its place, and those interpretations are not always accurate or fair.

For this reason, mature professional communities devote attention not only to current activities but also to preserving records of their own development. They document projects, archive important events, publish reports, and maintain institutional histories. Such efforts are valuable

not only for historians and researchers. They also enable future participants to understand the origins of important decisions, evaluate past mistakes, and avoid becoming dependent on interpretations created by others.

Ultimately, collective reputation resembles trust in personal relationships. It cannot be protected once and for all. No organization can obtain a permanent guarantee of integrity or eliminate the possibility of future problems. What organizations can do is create conditions in which an isolated incident does not automatically become a lasting judgment against an entire professional community.

Perhaps this is the most important task of any mature institution. The goal is not to prove absolute perfection, which is unattainable by definition, but to develop sufficient openness, accountability, and resilience so that the mistakes of a few do not erase the achievements of many years of honest work carried out by hundreds of others.

14. The Right to Individual Assessment

One of the most important achievements of modern civilization is the recognition that individuals should be judged on the basis of their own actions. This principle lies at the foundation of law, professional ethics, education, and most social institutions. It made possible the gradual rejection of collective guilt, inherited responsibility, and other forms of judgment based on origin, group membership, or social affiliation.

Yet the rejection of collective responsibility does not automatically eliminate collective distrust.

In everyday life, people continue to evaluate one another through the lens of social connections, professional affiliations, and organizational reputations. To some extent, this is unavoidable. No individual is capable of independently verifying all available information. For this reason, societies rely on various forms of collective experience as reference points when making decisions.

The problem arises when such reference points begin to replace individual assessment.

As professional systems become more complex, the temptation to rely on simplified patterns of judgment increases. If an organization has experienced problems in the past, observers may become inclined to approach all of its representatives with greater caution. If one member of a professional community violates established standards, there is often a tendency to view others through the same lens. Such approaches may reduce uncertainty and save time, but they also create the risk of serious error.

History demonstrates that some of the most persistent forms of unfairness rarely emerge from deliberate malice. More often, they result from attempts to simplify a complicated reality. Human beings naturally seek to organize diverse facts into understandable patterns. As a result, isolated

incidents gradually become associated with entire groups, and individual actions begin to be interpreted as evidence of collective characteristics.

In reality, however, every professional community consists of individuals with different experiences, beliefs, qualifications, and levels of responsibility. No organization is completely homogeneous. No professional environment can guarantee perfect conduct on the part of every participant. Consequently, attempts to judge individuals solely through their association with a particular institution inevitably distort reality.

This consideration is especially important when evaluating new participants in professional communities. They are often the people most affected by events in which they played no role. They did not make the decisions that led to controversy. They did not influence the circumstances that produced earlier mistakes. They had no opportunity to alter the course of past events. Yet they are frequently required to bear the consequences of actions taken by others.

For this reason, the right to individual assessment should be viewed not only as a legal principle but also as a necessary condition for the healthy development of professional communities.¹⁷ Without it, organizations cannot renew themselves, new initiatives struggle to emerge, and trust becomes increasingly difficult to rebuild after periods of crisis. If the past permanently determines how every new participant is perceived, opportunities for growth inevitably begin to diminish.

Of course, it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate the influence of collective reputation entirely. People will always take previous experience into account. Organizations will continue to draw lessons from past events. Administrative institutions will rely on accumulated practice when making decisions. Yet there is a fundamental difference between learning from experience and transferring distrust.

Learning from experience contributes to more informed and balanced decision-making. The transfer of distrust replaces an evaluation of the individual with an evaluation of the individual's environment.

For this reason, one of the most important challenges facing modern society is preserving the ability to distinguish between these two approaches. Every individual deserves to be heard in his or her own right. Every organization deserves to be evaluated on the basis of its present activities rather than solely through the lens of its past. Every professional community deserves the opportunity to renew itself and develop without endlessly reproducing the mistakes of previous participants.

Ultimately, the issue of collective reputation leads to a broader question of justice. How far should the consequences of another person's actions be allowed to extend? Where is the

¹⁷ Leonov, I. (2026). *Amerpass as a Non-State System of Transnational Professional Identification: Conceptual, Institutional and Ethical-Legal Foundations*.

boundary between reasonable caution and unjustified distrust? And how can societies preserve the lessons of the past without allowing those lessons to become obstacles to the future?

There are unlikely to be universal answers to these questions. Yet the search for such a balance remains one of the defining characteristics of mature institutions and healthy professional communities.

15. Conclusion

In contemporary society, trust remains one of the fundamental conditions of professional interaction. Without it, the development of science, journalism, entrepreneurship, civic initiatives, and countless other forms of activity would be impossible. Yet trust never exists in isolation. It develops gradually, accumulates over time, and depends not only on the reputation of individuals but also on the reputation of the professional environments to which they belong.

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the spread of distrust is not always the result of prejudice or intentional unfairness. In many cases, it emerges as a natural consequence of efforts to reduce risk and incorporate past experience into decision-making processes. For this reason, collective distrust arises not only within public opinion but also within organizations, professional communities, and administrative institutions.¹⁸

The central difficulty lies in the fact that the mechanisms governing trust and responsibility operate according to different principles. Modern legal systems are based on the concept of individual responsibility. Reputational processes, however, frequently extend far beyond the formal boundaries of personal accountability. As a result, the actions of individual actors may affect organizations, professional communities, and people who had no involvement in the original event.

This contradiction becomes particularly visible in fields where professional identification, recommendations, and organizational reputation play a significant role.¹⁹ Journalism, academic research, expert communities, and civic organizations depend heavily on trust. For that very reason, they are also especially vulnerable to the consequences of losing it.

Special attention in this study has been devoted to the phenomenon of institutional memory. Accumulated experience helps organizations avoid repeating previous mistakes, yet it also preserves perceptions of risk that may continue to influence future decisions long after the original circumstances have disappeared. Consequently, individuals may encounter the consequences of conflicts and crises with which they had no connection whatsoever.

¹⁸ Leonov, I., & Savchuk, Y. (2026). *Institutional Fear and Self-Censorship as Mechanisms of Social Adaptation in Highly Regulated Political Systems*.

¹⁹ Leonov, I. (2026). *RUPASS as a Non-State Professional Identification System: Institutional Trust Formation and Administrative Resistance in a High-Regulation Migration Regime*.

This reality invites a broader understanding of collective reputation. Reputation is not merely a reflection of an organization's current activities. It is also a form of inherited institutional memory. Such a legacy can perform both protective and restrictive functions. It preserves valuable experience, yet it may also hinder fair assessments of new participants within a professional environment.

In this context, the right to individual assessment assumes particular importance. It is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate the influence of collective reputation entirely. Individuals and institutions will always rely on previous experience when making decisions. Nevertheless, maintaining the ability to distinguish between a specific person and the broader environment to which that person belongs remains an essential condition of fairness and sustainable institutional development.

Ultimately, the maturity of any professional community is not measured by the absence of mistakes. Errors are inevitable in all forms of human activity. What matters far more is the ability to separate the actions of particular individuals from the reputation of everyone else within the system. Only then can a balance be maintained between reasonable caution and fair treatment.

The question of where collective distrust begins and where its limits should lie is unlikely ever to receive a definitive answer. Yet the issue becomes increasingly important in an era characterized by complex social networks, expanding professional communities, and the growing role of non-state mechanisms of professional identification. The more interconnected individuals and organizations become, the more important it is to understand how trust is formed, how distrust spreads, and where the boundary lies between collective experience and individual responsibility.

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