People in Places: Power and Traceability
Who is Empowered by Traceability?

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1 **Title** – welcome to our talk on power in the fishing sector. You will have notice that this title is not the same as is in the program – we felt that a concrete example of our theoretical interests was called for – so bear with us – we do intend to talk about technology and power. Also, this is our first attempt to use the Prezi presentation software; it seemed appropriate for our paper theme – we'll see how it goes.

2 **Lobster**: For this paper, we have examined one traceability project that is centered on lobster. Lobsters are crucial to the east coast inshore sector, and they are crucial to the assembly of people and technology that is involved in the lobster traceability project.

3 **Theoretical orientation** - this project has allowed us to address theoretical questions:

- Following Latour, and actor network theory, we are interested in the work that goes into assembling such a project,
- Also, following Latour and others, we are interested in science and technology studies that address the role of technology and nonhuman actors in that assembly process,
- Finally, following Foucault and Dean, we are interested in the outcomes in terms of how such technological projects empower some actors and perhaps disempower others.

We will argue that this traceability project raises questions about who is empowered and how. As we work through the various actors involved in this project, we will suggest that each actor had to consider their own objectives in deciding whether or not to become

involved – and this empowered different actors in different ways. Since we are at the preliminary stages of this paper, we want to use this opportunity to highlight the role that technology plays, and to ask you to discuss with us some questions about the relationship between power and technology.

4 First **Defining Traceability**: The traceability literature is divided on who is empowered. Some see it as **risk management** - as in this quote by Arienzo et al who call it:
"a device for the attribution of responsibility and reduction of risks".

Here the primary beneficiary is thought to be government, where traceability serves as a 'technology of power' in Foucault's terms. A problem is defined as technical, and a technical solution is devised, which in turn empowers government actors.

Others see traceability as enhancing **informed choice** for consumers – especially those who want to make ethical decisions in the marketplace. In Dean's terms, this may make traceability a 'technology of agency' in that subjects of the state are convinced to engage with technology to obtain their own ends, but with consequences that empower others.

We were curious about these two somewhat contradictory views, and hoped that analysis of one such traceability project could shed some light on the question of who is empowered by traceability projects and the role that technology plays in that.

We will argue that in part, the scale of such a project has meant that different agendas can all be furthered at the same time – environmentalism, consumer choice, support for the inshore fishery, risk management. This distributes power widely as Foucault once argued. But we also argue that this outcome is contingent on the selective use of technological means of connecting people and seafood.

5 **Seafood traceability** in Canada has been supported by some Canadian fishermen's organizations, largely for informed choice reasons. Our data comes from the perspective of one fisherman who got involved in the east coast project to tag lobster. His understanding of

the project gives us some idea of the various actors who needed to be brought on board for it to be successful.

6 This east coast traceability project was launched in 2010.

7 It involved significant organization by the NGO **Ecotrust**, who facilitated the **ThisFish** project on the east coast, in partnership with the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters. This work was facilitated by preexisting technology such as websites and database programs.

8 **ACOA** helped by providing some funds for the project. We'll return to this point briefly in our conclusions.

9 This enabled Ecotrust to do some **advocacy** work:

10 Among fishermen.

11 And among government regulators.

12 **Fishermen's organizations** from two Lobster Fishing Areas in the upper Bay of Fundy, organized tagging first (other LFAs have since gotten involved). Keep in mind that the agendas for Ecotrust and for the fishermen are not <u>exactly</u> the same – fishermen want to promote their product and Ecotrust wants to promote sustainable fisheries. Fishermen also did some advocacy work among their government contacts to keep them informed of the traceability project.

13 Both Ecotrust and fishermen also promoted the program among **middlemen**. The support or lack of support among seafood middlemen turned out to be crucial. Middlemen had concerns with how such tags might limit any product branding that they used in their marketing chain, and this continues to be a concern for some. For example, the same lobsters could be branded as from "St Mary's Bay", from "The Bay of Fundy", or in some markets, as "Maine lobsters".

For that reason, some middlemen have removed tags and sent them back to fishermen – the message being that they didn't want the tags on lobsters delivered to them.

14 Funding for Ecotrust and the ThisFish traceability project also allowed for working with fishermen to provide technological **training** and support where necessary – preparing videos, uploading videos onto a website, coordinating what would appear on the website etc.

15 **Fishermen**, on the other hand, had to develop protocols for:
- selecting the **lobster** to be tagging (only the fresh market quality),
- for the **tagging** process (which otherwise could slow their lobster handling down too much),
- for working with the ThisFish **website** to **upload** the tag numbers (originally this had to be done promptly or the website shut them down for further input).
- And to provide feedback on the **tags** and on the information uploading process (early versions of tags ripped off too easily).
- Some fishermen have integrated tagging into their **logbooks** – to allow them to better keep track of where and when tagged lobsters were caught.

16 Ecotrust and fishermen together worked with the manufacturer of the tags to produce a **tag** that suited the needs of the program and of the fishermen. There was some back and forth between fishermen, Ecotrust and the manufacturer until they got an acceptable tag – which required meeting the needs of several agendas (technical specifications, product promotion versus ecological literacy in the text, etc).

17 Meanwhile, the ThisFish **website** allowed (after some tinkering) for fishermen to upload tag numbers. When a customer types in one of those tag numbers, they receive information. As you can see – there is a standardized information form which fishermen fill out, including their years of fishing experience, their crew members and their home port. In addition, fishermen have the choice to upload **videos** of themselves, their boats and their harbours – and in some cases, video lessons on how to cook and eat a lobster.

As you can see from the quote – ThisFish hopes to serve several agendas with this one website. They want to:

- make the supply chain more transparent
- create a network of like-minded people,
- build trust in the quality and sustainability of seafood.

So far of the 7000 tagged lobster, 800 tags have been traced back to the website.

18 **Retailers**, **chefs** in restaurants and **consumers** are thus able to take the number off the tag, go to the ThisFish website, and not only see where the lobsters come from, but who caught them and how. Further, where fishermen include their **email** contact, consumers can provide direct feedback to the fishermen on their lobster experience. Our information is that fishermen have so far received positive feedback from people who contact them directly.

19 So **email** has become key to this contact – and key to responding to consumer queries. Not all fishermen provide their emails – but some do.

20 **Question:** In one case, a consumer asked about black liquid that drained out of a cooked lobster. The fishermen knew someone at the PEI Veterinarian Lab that was able to answer that question – and was able to email the customer that it was nothing to worry about.

21 Information flow through the **computer** and internet has played a key role here.

22 For example, some fishermen use their computer skills not only to upload tag numbers and to communicate with customers, but also to get a geographical snap shot of where their tags end up via **GeoCommons**. Here you see locations that tag queries have come from – the size of the orange dots indicates the number of tag queries from that city – given the global distribution of lobster tag queries, it appears that Fundy Lobster travel well!

23 Media interest in the tagging project, and a CBC story about the tagging process created more opportunity for communication between fishermen and consumers of seafood. **Social media technology** allows potential customers to either express approval (as in the first quote), or to complain about pricing or the distribution process, as in the second quote, where one comment asks why fishermen don't sell to the public directly. But note that these respondents are not necessarily customers and their reasons for negative feedback could range from ecological concerns to purchasing power and the price of seafood.

24 So what can we **Conclude** from this view of the assemblage of humans, lobsters, traps, boats, tags, emails, websites and other technology? Our thinking is still in the early stages here, but we have a few thoughts to share and that we hope will generate more discussion.

First, such assemblages are contingent, somewhat fragile and require a great deal of organizational effort. Actor Network Theory allows us to trace the successes and failures of such assemblages and better understand where, when and why they succeed or fail.

25 Second, understanding the connections and the role technology plays in making such an assembly work, allows us to consider more deeply Foucault's arguments about governance and technologies of power.

As a **technology of power**, lobster traceability projects are still in their infancy. So far government has played a very low-key role in this traceability project, and we heard very little about traceability to track problems and assess risk in seafood when discussing this project. But the financial support from ACOA suggests that some government agencies see a **commercial** benefit (perhaps through consumer choice opportunities).

On the other hand, some fishermen feel that where there is the option to record their tag numbers in their logbooks, government will get more involved in the future in order to gain more control over risk. Government may want the tag data for monitoring purposes.

26 Third, with such a complex project and with so many actors involved, the opportunity to break the chain by refusing to participate means that power is distributed in different ways throughout the actors – even if it is only the power to say no. We know some middlemen are resisting the project, perhaps for reasons of branding.

27 Fourth, terms of technology, power and individual agency, we see this traceability project as enhancing the power of inshore fishermen to reach the consumer in new ways. For the fisherman we interviewed, the benefits to date have outweighed any risks (of negative media stories perhaps turning buyers away from their product). But we have not spoken yet to any fishermen who refused to get involved, which would provide a different take on agency and on empowerment.

There are also spatial and scalar dimensions of the program that require further analysis as well. For example, technology allows fishermen to bridge geographical distances and to connect to consumers in new ways. Consumers (aided by technology) have new ways to visualize and interact with the space of fishing. Global consumers in many different countries are using tags to check out their food supply – such cross-geographical linkages are enabled through technology. Technology also connects fishermen's knowledge networks to consumers – as in the black goo question.

This is not empowering in the same way for all actors – for example, the program is able to connect fishermen directly to international buyers – and this scale-jumping concerns buyers, which is an instance of its potential power.

28 Fifth, while environmental organizations such as Ecotrust have their agenda in pursuing traceability (supporting sustainable fisheries), which sometimes allows others to pursue their own agendas as well – we feel the key role of technology should be further explored. Without the speed and connectivity offered by the internet, traceability in this format would be impossible – as would be this kind of consumer informed choice. What new technological opportunities will be offered in the future? How might they change the pattern of empowerment?

29 Finally, we would like to draw attention to the way this project encourages information flow along technological channels. We would argue that a key attribute of this program is that this **information flow** between the various actors helps to build trust and legitimacy for the fishery, for the governance process and for environmental management. This aspect is vital to consider in future arrangements of this sort – without close consultation with all of the above actors, the program cannot succeed over the long run. Here, technology may be playing a vital role not only in risk management and consumer choice, but also in better resource management.

30 Questions?   31 Authors and Acknowledgements