The Double Bind of Market Intermediation:

Occupational Encroachment and Procedural Credibility

Corentin Curchod[1], Georg Rilinger[2], Gerardo Patriotta[3]

Abstract

Market intermediaries are prone to conflict with the parties they serve. Scholars trace such conflicts to opposed profit motives or to the structural asymmetry between brokers and parties. Drawing on extensive archival material collected during an ethnography of a French fish exchange, we identify a source of conflict rooted in the organizational requirements of intermediation itself. The apparatus that made the auction effective reached beyond the marketplace and encroached on fishers' occupational practices. Despite consistently higher prices inside the exchange, many fishers exited to recover their craft autonomy. These occupational encroachments pose a second puzzle: given that the exchange was designed to serve its members, why did it not defuse the conflict informally, as organizations routinely do through decoupling? We show that the intermediary's structural position foreclosed this option. Because participants suspected the exchange of partiality, informal exceptions would have been read as favoritism. The exchange could relax its rules only through formal, universally applicable reform, a constraint we call procedural credibility. We thus bridge research on brokerage and decoupling to show that formalized intermediation needs to contend with a double bind: the organizational demands of intermediation generate conflict, while the need to signal impartiality forecloses standard organizational remedies.

Keywords

market intermediation; brokerage; decoupling; platform economy; market design

[1] University of Edinburgh Business School, 29 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9JS, corentin.curchod@ed.ac.uk
[2] MIT Sloan School of Management, E62-480, 100 Main St. 02142 Cambridge, Ma, USA, rilinger@mit.edu
[3] University of Bath School of Management, Convocation Ave, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AZ, UK, gp735@bath.ac.uk

Introduction

Market intermediation is characterized by conflict. Platform companies, for example, try to control users with evaluative devices and algorithmic control (Curchod et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2024; Zuboff, 2023), while participants try to resist (Cameron and Rahman 2022). The dominant explanation for such conflicts focuses on opposed profit motives, the desire of each side to extract the value created in intermediation for oneself (Wood, Martindale, and Lehdonvirta 2023a). Financial advisers, talent agencies, and gig platforms match actors across two sides of a market and provide a valuable service to participants who cannot easily transact directly (Abolafia 2001; Aspers and Darr 2022; Bielby and Bielby 1999). But the position that allows intermediaries to create this value also enables them to claim a share of it. Users meanwhile seek to protect their gains from trade. This generates persistent struggles over users' dependency on the intermediary (Gu 2024). Conflict, on this view, is driven by efforts to extract, reallocate, or protect the value created in intermediation.

However, this distributional view of conflict sidesteps a prior question. Particularly in anonymous markets with shifting transaction partners, intermediation relies on a substantial organizational apparatus to identify and facilitate matches — the procedures, classifications, and evaluative devices of an exchange or a digital platform (Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson 2015; Kornberger, Pflueger, and Mouritsen 2017; Rilinger 2025). These apparatuses are technically demanding and potentially constrain what market actors can do and how they do it. Taking an organizational perspective on market intermediation, we investigate how the organizational requirements of effective intermediation can themselves generate conflict, and how standard organizational mechanisms for managing internal tensions—most notably 'decoupling' (Meyer and Rowan 1977) – relate to such conflicts within marketplace intermediaries.

This paper examines a historical case that makes this question concrete. In the 1960s, fishers and local officials in Cherbourg, France, created a marketplace that replaced bilateral negotiations. Because fish spoils quickly and boats arrive at similar times, buyers can play fishers against one another and depress prices (Bestor 2004; Graddy 2006). The marketplace was intended to counter buyer power, and it did: the auction delivered consistently higher average prices than quayside dealing. Yet by 2007, a growing number of fishers had returned to direct quayside deals. This is puzzling because the usual explanation for conflict does not fit: the exchange was not designed to profit from fishers' dependency but rather to help overcome it. So, what prompted conflict severe enough to leave?

Based on an extensive corpus of archival material assembled in the course of an ethnographic study, we show that the organizational apparatus that made the Cherbourg auction work — product standardization, temporal coordination, and transparent documentation — simultaneously encroached on fishers' occupational practices outside of the exchange. Standardized categories conflicted with craft judgments about how to sort and handle a catch; the auction schedule clashed with the rhythms of tides, weather, and landings; and transparent records of prices and volumes exposed fishers' catching patterns to regulatory scrutiny. These *occupational encroachments* quickly accumulated into a reason to exit. By disintermediating, fishers could recover their craft autonomy at the cost of lower prices and fewer supporting services.

However, while a focus on the exchange's organizational apparatus reveals a distinct source of conflict between the exchange and its members, it simultaneously deepens the original puzzle. Given that the exchange was devised to help fishers, it is not clear why the exchange did not address their grievances. Legal changes had made modification of Cherbourg's formal structure cumbersome and difficult. But organizations routinely manage tensions between formal structure and operational practice through *decoupling*: they preserve formal procedures while tolerating practical deviations through workarounds, euphemistic discourse, gray zones, and selective enforcement (Anteby 2008; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Turco 2012). We therefore ask why the Cherbourg market could not absorb fishers' grievances informally.

The empirical analysis reveals that the structural position of the intermediary blocked the informal resolution of the conflict, thereby intensifying its consequences (Fernandez-Mateo 2007; Simmel 1950). Because Cherbourg stood between parties whose interests diverged and could tilt any exchange toward one side, participants watched closely for signs of partiality. Holding the two sides required the exchange to constantly signal its impartiality (Fernandez and Gould 1994). An informal accommodation, however reasonable, would have been read as favoritism and would have eroded the perceived neutrality on which participation depends. We call this constraint on decoupling *procedural credibility*: the intermediary's requirement to sustain participation by making its impartiality publicly observable through the uniform application of stated procedures. In short, the organizational requirements of effective intermediation can produce serious conflicts because they interfere with activities outside the exchange, while the need to sustain membership by signaling impartiality forecloses the informal adjustments that might otherwise ameliorate them. The intermediary thus faces a double bind: the very apparatus that generates the frictions is the one it cannot adjust informally.

In developing this inductive argument, the paper bridges the literatures on intermediation and decoupling, each supplying contributions to the other. Reading intermediation through an organizational lens reveals a source of conflict that the focus on structural position and interests elides. Reading decoupling through the broker's structural position reveals a new reason that informal accommodation can be foreclosed in organizations. Together, they show that market intermediation can fail even when it is ostensibly successful.

Conflict in intermediation

Market intermediation is prone to gaming, contestation of terms, and, in extreme cases, exit. These dynamics are especially acute in market platforms, where a single intermediary sets the terms of exchange for many independent participants. Scholarship across economics and sociology offers distinct explanations for the conflictual nature of platform intermediation. In economic accounts, conflict stems from a struggle over value that intermediation creates (Evans and Schmalensee 2016; Rochet and Tirole 2006). By collecting information about supply and demand, identifying optimal matches, vouching for transactions, and resolving disputes, intermediaries lower the search and transaction costs that make direct exchange difficult (Cusumano, Yoffie, and Gawer 2020; Hagiu and Wright 2015). Both market participants and the intermediary try to capture this value. Conflict results because the platform tries to charge the highest possible fees while the users are constantly looking for ways to get rid of them. Disintermediation occurs when the cost of staying with an intermediary exceeds the gains it produces (Enache and Rhodes 2025; Gu 2024; Gu and Zhu 2021).

Sociological research on the platform economy provides a complementary account. Treating the platform firm as a modern version of the Taylorist factory (Vertesi and Enriquez 2025), it has focused less on conflicts over economic value and instead highlighted issues of labor control (Vallas and Schor 2020). Platform companies deploy rating systems, surveillance tools, and classificatory infrastructure to control market exchanges on ‘gig platforms’ (Curchod et al. 2020; Fourcade and Healy 2024; Kellogg et al. 2020; Wood, Martindale, and Lehdonvirta 2023b). Users engage in explicit or hidden acts of resistance to skirt these forms of labor control

(Cameron 2024; Lei 2021; Rahman 2021; Schüßler et al. 2021). This research highlights that platforms are constantly working to increase users' dependency and, coming from a broadly Marxist perspective, the literature typically views these efforts to impose control and foster dependency as means to an end of surplus extraction (Grabher and König 2020; Zuboff 2023). The source of conflict thus again rests on divergent profit motives.

Both accounts view the reasons for conflict in a way that the brokerage literature reframes at a higher level of abstraction, and in doing, so broadens (Burt 1992; Reagans and Zuckerman 2008; Stovel and Shaw 2012) A broker is a position that bridges a disconnect between two parties by letting goods or information flow across this 'structural hole' (Stovel and Shaw 2012). The crucial point is that the position which lets the broker create value also makes the parties dependent on it, and that dependency is what enables the broker to control how the surplus is divided. How the surplus is divided does not necessarily reflect the broker's extractive interest (Fernandez-Mateo 2007; Marsden 1983). For instance, a platform may need to subsidize new users from the fees of old ones to build network effects, improving efficiency overall (Cusumano et al. 2020). This, too, can cause contestation.

More generally, the brokerage literature reminds us that the seeds of conflict are built into the very structural configuration that creates the value of intermediation in the first place. Because the broker *could* allocate the surplus to its own advantage, and because it typically knows more than anyone else about how the surplus is actually divided, the parties cannot be entirely sure that it will not abuse this advantage. So, they watch, question, and resist (Fernandez and Gould 1994; Simmel 1950). Conflict is thus not reducible to divergent profit motives. It follows from a structural power asymmetry that the broker does not have to exercise for the parties to become suspicious.

The brokerage literature simultaneously shows that this structural tension is more conditional than the other literatures suggest. The asymmetry may not exist as assumed: non-redundant ties which maximize a broker's information advantage also leave it dependent on connections it cannot easily replace, shifting the bargaining advantage to the counterparty (Reagans and Zuckerman 2008). Where the asymmetry does hold, it does not necessarily erupt into conflict, because brokers can stabilize their position in a variety of ways. For example, a matchmaker who may be bypassed after introducing two transaction partners can stay relevant by offering services they still need, such as translating across professional languages or resolving disputes (Kellogg 2014). Reputation and external guarantees can also secure trust from outside (Burt 2005; Coleman 1988), and, most consequentially, brokerage can be *formalized*. Stovel, Golub, and Milgrom (Stovel, Golub, and Milgrom 2011) trace broker fragility to the informality of brokerage relationships and treat formal market exchanges as its most stable form. Formalization makes the broker's conduct predictable and its exercise of power legible, and so easier to trust.

In sum, while most research on market intermediation of platforms locates the root of conflicts in opposed profit motives, brokerage theory locates conflict, more broadly, in the structural asymmetries between broker and parties themselves. Yet, it also suggests that *formalization* is the surest path to establish credibility and pacify mistrust. Why, then, would a formalized exchange, designed to operate as a neutral intermediary with no profit motive of its own, generate conflict severe enough to drive out the members it was built to serve?

Markets as organizations

In markets where transactions occur between changing buyers and sellers, intermediaries can identify optimal matches only by continuously collecting, aggregating, and evaluating dispersed information about supply and demand. Because market actors often have conflicting interests, the intermediary must carefully structure the rules, procedures, and interfaces through which this information is collected and fed back into transactions. To establish a level playing field based on truthful information, effective market design thus requires a substantial organizational apparatus that collects relevant information, makes it commensurable, ranks it, and then coordinates transactions on the basis of it (Kominers, Teytelboym, and Crawford 2017; Rilinger 2024).

These apparatuses tend to reshape the activities they organize (Fourcade and Johns 2020; Scott 2020): rankings change what the ranked prioritize (Sauder and Espeland 2009), and evaluative infrastructures alter the practices of those they measure (Kornberger et al. 2017). This raises the possibility of a source of conflict that has neither to do with divergent profit motives nor with the structural asymmetry between market actors and the intermediary itself. The organizational requirements of effective intermediation may collide with participants' occupational practices, particularly where those practices form a craft that prizes autonomy (Ranganathan 2018; Stinchcombe 1986). What such conflict would look like is not obvious, since participants meet inside the exchange only as market actors. We will argue that the tension arises not within the exchange but *around* it: the coordinating apparatus reaches past the walls of the marketplace and into participants' work — at sea and on the docks, in the case we examine —governing practices the exchange was never designed to reach. We call these frictions *occupational encroachments*, and we develop them in the analysis below.

But this insight only deepens the puzzle. Conflict is hardly rare in organizations. Whenever the formal mechanisms of an organization move into conflict with the occupational practices of their members, organizations can either change the formal rules or, more commonly, make room for informal adjustments. The obvious question, then, is why a public exchange, built to serve its members, could not simply absorb these frictions through the informal accommodations organizations rely on every day.

Difficult Decoupling in Marketplaces

Scholars have developed the notion of decoupling to explain how organizations manage recurrent tensions between formal structure and occupational practice. Meyer and Rowan (1977) famously observed that organizations often adopt formal structures to secure legitimacy from external audiences while decoupling those structures from actual operations to preserve technical efficiency. This works because the organization's external representation is separable from its operational core. Ceremony and substance can then serve different audiences: external evaluators assess the formal structure, members do the work, and a "logic of confidence and good faith" ensures that neither side inspects the gap too closely. A public marketplace should be able to rely on the same logic: the organizers could maintain the formal apparatus of the auction while quietly tolerating the deviations that ease their members' burden. Profit-oriented platform companies do exactly this, accommodating informal workarounds to retain workers (Curchod et al. 2020). What, then, prevents a public exchange from deploying the same decoupling mechanisms to absorb occupational frictions?

Research on what Turco (2012) calls "difficult decoupling" has identified three conditions under which decoupling may be foreclosed. The first is definitional. As Meyer and Rowan conceived it, decoupling works only when formal structure and internal practice are "loosely" coupled (Orton and Weick 1990). Where the formal structure describes how the product must actually be made - where the two are "tightly" coupled - decoupling is foreclosed because departing from procedure would degrade output.

The second condition arises when internal audiences become substantively committed to the legitimating discourse. Members may internalize evaluative criteria and treat them as real measures of worth, eliminating the slack that permits workarounds (Sauder and Espeland 2009). Leaders who answer to external audiences may gain a mandate to enforce institutional ideals in the operational core (Hallett 2010) while members themselves may appropriate the legitimating discourse to resist practices they see as incompatible with the organization's mission or their professional identity (Turco 2012).

The third condition concerns external audiences. The rise of accountability and transparency regimes (Power 1997) has made decoupling harder to sustain, letting outsiders peer behind the façade of policy statements. As external monitoring closes the classic policy-practice gap, organizations are pushed toward means-ends decoupling: implementing policies that still fail to achieve their stated goals (Bromley and Powell 2012). This residual form of decoupling persists where stakeholders cannot verify links between procedures and outcomes (Kaufmann, Krlev, and Brown 2025), but is unavailable where organizations are committed to transparency and openness (Brandtner, Powell, and Horvath 2024; Horvath 2023).

All three explanations share a common logic: decoupling fails because some audience — internal or external — comes to treat the formal apparatus as *substantively* meaningful and refuses to tolerate the gap between stated commitment and actual practice. What drives the resistance is a commitment to the apparatus as stated, whether functional or normative. All three are plausible candidates for our case, but none explains why a profit-oriented platform company can quietly accept decoupling while a public exchange cannot. As we will show, the public exchange reveals a distinct mechanism of difficult decoupling.

As Simmel first observed (Fernandez and Gould 1994; Simmel 1950), a neutral intermediary must constantly demonstrate its impartiality to ward off the suspicion inherent in its superior position. Formalization, as the brokerage literature shows, is the primary vehicle for that demonstration. But it means the exchange must show, again and again, that it remains beholden to the norms of bureaucracy - to the uniform, equal, and transparent application of its rules. The point is foreshadowed by research on legal consciousness (Silbey 2005), which highlights that symbolic and ceremonial action can carry social weight in its own right. Consequently, even when no member or outside audience cares about the substance of a rule — indeed, even when they contest it — and there is no functional reason to hold to it, the exchange may still have to enforce it to signal its impartiality. We call this constraint *procedural credibility*: the intermediary's requirement to sustain participation by applying its stated rules to everyone alike and in the open. The irony is that the very source of the intermediary's credibility as an impartial broker is what prevents it from informally easing the frictions its coordination imposes on members. After developing this argument through the case, we will come back to the implications for the literature in the discussion.

Case

This study examines a historical episode of dis- and re-intermediation at a fish exchange in Cherbourg, a harbor in Normandy, France, in 2007. Fish exchanges are the central organizational form for the wholesale of fresh fish: most fish landed by professional vessels in Europe is marketed through centralized exchanges along the coast, and auctions have long been the dominant pricing mechanism in fish exchanges across the world (Anderson and Martínez-Garmendia 2003). France itself has 34 market halls ('*halles à marée*') that are operated by local managers. With roughly 5,500 tons of fish sold for an annual turnover above 13 million euros, Cherbourg ranked thirteenth in France by volume and fifteenth by revenue. Like most French halles à marée, Cherbourg was part of the public domain. The local chamber of commerce and industry had operated the exchange under a public concession since 1961. To cover its personnel costs, routine maintenance, and logistics, it relied on a hybrid model combining public funds, European subsidies, and a 5% commission on the value of each transaction, paid by the fishers and buyers alike. Auxiliary services were charged at an extra cost.

The Cherbourg exchange evolved from a relatively informal arrangement based on mutual agreements in the 1950s, to a formally structured exchange in the 1960s. It first adopted a large display hall and sales room inaugurated in 1961. It was redesigned again in 1992 with modern equipment intended to maintain the integrity of the cold chain, and the *criée à la voix* was replaced in October 1993 by an electronic descending-price auction intended to increase allocative efficiency. Remote bidding was added in 1994. In the early 2000s the role of the market expanded again, as it began to offer auxiliary services such ice production, container cleaning, and refrigerated storage. In 2006 the facility was accordingly renamed from "criée de Cherbourg" to "centre de marée," signaling the shift from a pure auction venue to a full-service organization. The exchange employed around 40 people and hosted vessels of different types and sizes, including trawlers, seiners, and line vessels. Larger offshore vessels typically spent one or two weeks at sea before returning to unload, while smaller inshore vessels were at sea only one or two days.

By 2007, the role of the market as a full-service hub was solidly established. Yet the director and management team grew increasingly concerned by the steady decline in market-utilizing vessels. Between 1980 and 2000, the attrition was largely confined to smaller boats. However, the loss of three trawlers in 2006 served as a catalyst, forcing the director to actively confront the threat of disintermediation. [1] This was a serious problem, because the auction's price-discovery efficiency and the volumes that sustained the cost of running it both depended on active participation. The coincidence between organizational expansion and disintermediation in the absence of a clear profit motive turns this into an ideal case to study the friction inherent in the organizational process of intermediation itself.

Data & Methods

This article draws on a corpus of fieldwork material — interviews, field notes from ethnographic observation, and official documents — collected by the first author in 2007–2008. All sources are listed in Table 1. The original questions revolved around price formation. Re-examining the corpus in 2024 against recent work on conflict in platform markets, we recognized that the case posed a distinct challenge for theories developed primarily around for-profit platforms with substantial power asymmetries, and re-analyzed the data accordingly.

The interview material covers both formal interviews, conducted in a back office at the exchange, and informal conversations on ship decks or on the docks, often while fishers continued working. The sample was assembled in consultation with the director of the market, who scheduled the first wave of interviews and made the necessary introductions. Additional interviews were scheduled during the first week of observation to deepen emerging insights. For instance, when it became clear that bilateral trading was still taking place, the first author requested interviews with fishers active in both formal and informal channels of trade in order to understand their motivations. The composition of the sample reflects the original goal of understanding how four groups of actors interacted in the daily functioning of the market. A total of 45 interviews were conducted: nine with buyers (including wholesale buyers and brokers); thirteen with fishers, all of them captains; three with outside authorities (the regional director of the fisheries committee, the director of the professional association of fishers, and the director of the regional fishers' cooperative); and twenty with market managers and staff, including the market director. Four buyers and five fishers participated in both formal and informal channels of trade.

Interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes on average and totaled about 20 hours; all were recorded and transcribed in full. The low average reflects that informal interviews were necessarily brief, conducted in a work setting in which informants could rarely step away for extended periods; observational and follow-up material provided depth that single interviews could not. Because fishers were wary of outsiders, the market's development manager acted as a guide and provided background information to help establish rapport. The guide introduced the first author to each informant before the interview and, to avoid the appearance of association, typically left while the interview took place, returning only after it had concluded. This route into the field shaped the sample, and the fieldwork corrected for it in two ways. The interviews the first author requested during the observation period targeted the actors management had least reason to showcase — fishers active in informal channels and buyers trading on both sides. And the observation of direct sales took place off-site, without market staff present. The most market-critical material in the corpus, the accounts of exited fishers and of routine quota circumvention, entered through these channels.

The field notes cover a full month of fieldwork — three weeks of intermittent observation (weeks 1, 3, and 4) and one week of interviews (week 2) — with approximately 100 hours of observation documented same-day, either through voice recordings or written notes. Five nights of observation, from midnight to 9 a.m., cover the full sequence of routine market operations. Because the work was highly routinised, with variation mainly in the types and quantities of fish on sale rather than in the basic sequence of activity, these nights give a complete picture of the unloading, display, and auction of fish lots. The sessions typically began at the dock warehouse, where vessels unloaded their catches and the fish were sorted and prepared. The notes then follow the display phase, during which buyers and others inspected the fish; the move to the salesroom for the 5:30 a.m. auction; and the subsequent clerical work of printing receipts and related documents in a separate room. They end with descriptions of morning coffee with the team in the cafeteria and observation of after-sales operations in the main offices from around 8 a.m. onward.

Additional notes cover four further aspects of the exchange. A first set of five days follows administrative staff during the day, documenting moments of tension with buyers and fishers over allocations and prices. A second set (one day) covers observation in a processing annex, documenting fishers unloading, cleaning, sorting, and packaging mussels before sale. A third set (two days) covers observations of informal sales outside the exchange proper and includes conversations with fishers involved in them. A fourth set (2 days) follows buyers at work, including: a wholesale merchant buying remotely from his home office and a visit to a large buyer's processing facility. The appendix contains further information about the exchange and fieldsite photos.

Official documents collected on site, online, and through five follow-up conversations with managers complement these materials. The resulting corpus comprises both internal and external documents. Internal documents include annual reports and membership contracts from the exchange, plus quality classifications and informational materials from the regional quality association.

External documents — EU and French regulatory texts, ministerial reports, producer-organization materials, price lists, and consultants' reports — served two purposes: they let us trace informants' assertions about "European rules and obligations" back to the underlying legal texts, and they supplied regulatory background not accessible through interviews and observation, particularly on the evolving rights and obligations of fish markets in France.

— TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE —

The analysis treated the 2007–08 corpus as a stable archive (Abbott 2014) and followed the conventions of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Starting from the puzzle of disintermediation in a public exchange, we used NVivo to code the data in search for the origin of fishers' discontent. Once it became clear that they objected to the very requirements of effective intermediation, we coded for the *occupational encroachments* the organizational apparatus created beyond the exchange. From there, it became puzzling why the exchange would have trouble resolving these frictions informally. Following the relevant counterfactuals, we gradually realized that standard explanations for difficult decoupling do not apply and developed our concept of *procedural credibility* to account for the importance of signaling impartiality.

Findings

We develop the findings in three parts. The first section recovers the puzzle: the exchange's organizational apparatus resolved real problems fishers faced in bilateral trade, yet fishers increasingly bypassed it. The second section shows that this apparatus—designed to constitute the auction as a functioning market—simultaneously reached into fishers' occupational lives in ways that created friction with their craft. The third section shows that these frictions could not be informally accommodated because this would have sacrificed the exchange's standing as an impartial broker.

The Puzzle of Disintermediation

The Cherbourg market was designed to resolve two core problems that fishers faced in the old system of direct, over-the-counter sales (Bigot et al. 2008). First, fishers needed to find buyers, which took time and skills they often felt they did not have. When asked why she would not sell direct, a fisherwoman replied that she did not have the time to find customers, and that “the fisher isn’t made for that anyway, it’s a price war; it’s awful”. A solo fisher explained this problem in terms of the long workday:

> I get up at 4 AM to go out to sea, and I come back around 4 PM. If I start running around to fishmongers and restaurants, I’ll never finish... I sail alone, so I don’t have any help... But I’m not going to amuse myself by running after clients.

Second, direct sales generally benefitted the buyers. Because of the high level of perishability of seafood, the fishers were under pressure to sell quickly. Wholesale buyers could take advantage of this constraint by protracting negotiations. They could tell one fisher that the other was likely to sell at a lower price. Because it would have taken time to verify this, fishers would often prefer to accept a lower price. Similarly, because buyers faced less pressure to close the deal with any one fisher, buyers could assess the quality of fish and weigh seafood products themselves. Given this power-asymmetry, those selling fish directly “never get very high prices,” as one fisher told us.

The organizational apparatus of the exchange addressed these problems through three interlocking mechanisms: product standardization, temporal coordination, and transparency, each of which simultaneously resolved a specific friction in bilateral trade and constituted a foundational element of the auction itself.

When fishers sold direct, buyers effectively determined what counted as good fish because they could weigh and assess the specific offerings themselves. The exchange replaced this practice with an independent classification system. All fish were graded on a uniform scale: B for average quality, A for good, and E (for “Extra”) for top quality. Once fishers had unloaded their catch, employees of the market (the ‘sorters’) inspected every batch and sorted them by quality.

The Local Operating Regulations specified that weighing and sorting fish were the exclusive responsibility of market employees. A manager verified the sorting and printed tags for each box, summarizing the type of fish, quantity, and quality grade. Veterinary services carried out a final inspection before the sale, with the authority to downgrade a batch or, in extreme cases, forbid its sale. Every other week, a quality officer checked the sorters' work and reported errors for training purposes (see appendix photos). This apparatus of commensuration (Espeland and Stevens 1998) stripped buyers of their ability to impose their own criteria as binding. By standardizing fish along the different quality grades, the system made it possible to define what lots of fish were in competition with each other. Without it, there would have been no equivalent lots for buyers to bid on and thus no basis for competitive valuation.

A second element was the formal set of rules, procedures, and practices that defined how transactions were struck. Cherbourg replaced protracted and disjointed negotiations with a tightly structured auction in which all buyers bid simultaneously. The display hall of the market opened at 4 a.m., allowing buyers to view the fish. Sales inspectors made their rounds, and the chief auctioneer checked the fish to ensure correct quality grading. At 5:30 a.m., descending clock auctions began in a specially equipped salesroom where buyers sat behind individual computer screens, each in a separate booth. Sellers were not allowed in the room. The auction systematically worked through all lots: each round began with a high price for a given batch, which decremented automatically every few seconds, and the first buyer to stop the clock purchased the lot at the displayed price. Around 65% of transactions were concluded online by remote buyers who never set foot in the building. Once someone 'stopped the clock', the transaction counted as finalized and no further bargaining was possible. By bringing all buyers together in a single location at a single point in time and forcing them to transact through a shared mechanism, the auction resolved fishers' difficulties of "running after clients." But it simultaneously created competitive pressures that drove up the price.

A third set of arrangements ensured that prices, bids, and transactions were public. Based on the inspection and preparation of fish prior to the auction, the exchange published an online sales catalogue identifying the quality, size, and type of fish in every box on sale. The descending clock made prices public facts: because it decremented a single, visible price that any buyer could stop at any moment, each buyer faced pressure to reveal their true valuation rather than holding out for a private deal. After the auction, clerks processed receipts, invoices, and transaction logs in a dedicated clerical room. Once they were done, results were published.

This system resolved the knowledge asymmetries of bilateral trade. Public records stabilized expectations about what counted as an appropriate price for a given product and created a shared understanding of supply and demand, eliminating buyers' ability to exploit private information in negotiations. In short, the classification system, the auction procedures, and the data regime jointly helped to overcome the problems of the bilateral negotiation. As formal mechanisms for product standardization, temporal coordination, and transparency, they were constitutive of the exchange as such. Table 2 summarizes the three mechanisms.

--- Table 2 about here ---

The system worked as intended. Direct comparison of auction and bilateral prices is impossible, because bilateral trades were struck informally and left no records. But informants on every side of the choice agreed that there was a substantial difference. Fishers who sold through the exchange, fishers who sold direct, buyers, and the producer organizations all described auction prices as higher on average, even after the 5% commission that fishers and buyers paid on each transaction — an assessment consistent with the economic literature comparing auctions and negotiated sales (Arnarson and Trondsen 1998; Bulow and Klemperer 1996; Helstad et al. 2005). For example, one fisher who specialized in shellfish described the difference between selling direct to wholesalers who "set the price based on how much they need to undercut competitors and account for their 30% margins, leaving us with only the remainder," and the market, where "the buyers fight for the products", thereby implying a reversal of power.

The market thus promised higher and more predictable prices than direct exchange. Yet, it did not always produce prices that everyone perceived as *fair*. Descending clock auctions allow for strategic behavior that can distort prices.[2] For instance, buyers who understand the needs of other buyers might strategically wait until the other buyers satisfy their demand to face less competition during later rounds. One buyer, who told us before a sale that he "desperately need[ed] some size 2 whiting", refrained from buying at the beginning of the sale so he could benefit from lower prices at the end, taking the risk that he would miss out on the fish:

> I knew there was around a ton of size 2 on sale. I knew that one 50 kg box, two 240 kg piles and two 400 kg pallets were coming at the end of the sale. I also knew that there would be less demand after 420 kg of sales. So after Aber [another wholesale buyer] got what he wanted, I just waited, and the price went down. It fell by 30 cents, so I did a good deal in the end.

In short, though the descending clock auction was not perfect, fishers found that the exchange improved prices relative to direct sales and made transactions easier for them. But despite freeing up fishers' time, higher prices on average, reduced power asymmetry, and faster payment, a substantial and growing share of transactions took place through informal channels. To explain this inconsistency, we look beyond the walls of the exchange to the occupational practices of fishers.

Collisions between Formalized Intermediation and Occupational Practice

Since the 1980s, the Cherbourg exchange underwent progressive formalization with the most extensive changes in 2006, when it transitioned to a full-service market hall. By the time of fieldwork, all three components of the organizational apparatus had begun to reach beyond the marketplace into fishers' occupational lives. This reach generated *occupational encroachments*—frictions between the requirements of effective intermediation and fishers' craft practices — across each of the three constitutive dimensions of the exchange. We describe each in turn.

Product standardization vs. craft As noted, Cherbourg's quality grading system was not just important to constitute markets in equivalent goods but also reduced buyers' unilateral ability to determine what makes 'good fish.' Indeed, the marketplace infrastructure was designed to ensure quality standards and remove buyers' prerogative to assess fish. For instance, Cherbourg had an offloading point in a secondary port that was equipped with weighing and labeling machines, which ensured product traceability, and refrigerated areas fitted with sorting grids and rinsing systems. The facility, built at the request of the fishers, was intended to improve product quality and consequently raise selling prices. As a local mussel fisher explained: "Before, the mussels were unloaded directly onto the ground, in direct sunlight; they stayed there all day, and with the truck arriving at four in the afternoon, we sold the mussels for a miserable price. With this new facility, prices have increased considerably, so I wouldn't go back."

But the exchange imposed strict guidelines to guarantee the quality standards. Fishers were expected to sort their products within the refrigerated spaces of the facility, which were maintained at 8 degrees Celsius. Many fishers refused to comply with these requirements and preferred to sort their mussels outside the facility. When the first author asked one fisher why he avoided the refrigerated areas, he scoffed: "I'd like to see you in there, in the cold, catching pneumonia!" Another fisher, whom the development manager called 'the intellectual' and recommended us to interview, commented on the market authorities: "The way they're hassling us all the time, with regulations, with refrigerated rooms. I mean, we're perfectly clean. It's just hassles for the sake of hassles. These standards are becoming too much." The palpable frustration expressed by a supposedly moderate fisher reveals a conflict with a deep-seated work culture characterized by a sense of craft ("we're perfectly clean") and rejection of imposed constraints. This mindset was further confirmed by the development manager, who explained the difficulty of imposing quality norms:

> "Quality norms require mussels to be sorted and stored in a cold room. I've told them this many times! But these guys, when I say something, they just tell me to bug off, that they'll never sort their stuff inside. When fishers say 'no', they really mean 'no'."

As the previous example shows, this categorical reaction was less a reaction against specific inconveniences (fishing is very hard work, after all) and more a reaction against the exchange's 'regulations' trespassing on the core of their craft – what it means to treat fish well. The statement "we're perfectly clean" is revealing here: it suggests the fisher took the regulation as an affront against the quality of his craft.

A related but distinct problem was that fishers did not feel like the quality grades always mapped onto their own understanding of quality. For instance, they often complained that their efforts to catch high-quality fish were not being rewarded. One of them blamed market mechanisms for this anomaly, and described how demotivating it was:

> "We try to improve the quality, but it doesn't pay more on the market. It's unfortunate. A high-quality product is not priced higher than an average product. It's not rewarded. If the market rate is low one day, your high-quality product won't be sold at a higher price than the market rate. It's discouraging, because I work so hard to add value to my products."

The quote shows that he felt like his own craft-based sense of quality, the work he put in to "add value," was not being recognized by the auction's pricing mechanism. A fisher who takes exceptional care to deliver high-quality fish may receive an "A" just like one who does the minimum, and on a bad auction day, the price for "A" fish may not exceed the price for "B." That being said the price listings of the exchange show that fish with higher quality rating did generally achieve higher prices in the auctions.[3] Even when this was true, many fishers insisted that the potential additional revenues were not worth the effort because the established categories did not adequately capture the degree of effort required to move from one to the other.

Temporal Coordination: time of the market vs. time of the sea A core part of the auction system was temporal coordination. It replaced protracted bilateral negotiations with simultaneous competitive bidding. But the rigid schedules this coordination required collided with fishers' pace of work: the tides, the weather, and catch unpredictability. This happened because the 5:30 AM auction required coordination far beyond the auction itself. To make it in time, vessels had to arrive at the dock warehouse by 11 PM the night before the sale. Between 11 PM and 4:30 AM, market staff and vessel crews unloaded, prepared, and sorted the fish for display. During one observation, the first author witnessed a conversation between a fisher and market staff about the fact that the exchange did not organize afternoon sales. The fisher complained that by scheduling all sales for the morning, the exchange forced him to sail back overnight even if the tides were not favorable, which led to higher fuel costs. The development manager of the exchange confirmed during a follow-up interview that he often received complaints about logistical constraints, particularly about the timetables. Fishers had to adapt their work schedule to the market platform's rhythm rather than the sea's, which they found deeply "annoying," as this quote from one of them shows:

> "With the exchange you need to respect the timetables, and the sale is at a certain time, and you have to be there on time. But we're dependent on tides, so it's not easy for us. We need to adapt to them, and it's annoying."

Different kinds of fishers faced different problems with the rhythm of the market. Inshore fishers faced daily conflicts with tides; offshore fishers had to time multi-week trips to arrive by 11 PM, which could mean cutting short a productive fishing run or sailing back in bad conditions.

Conversely, arriving too early created its own logistical burdens. One fisher noted that if a vessel arrived ahead of schedule, the crew had "to store the fish," which effectively meant "more staff and higher costs." Fishers also frequently returned home on Fridays, but the market was closed on Saturdays - a persistent source of frustration that led fishers to lobby repeatedly for Saturday sales. This observation note from a heated exchange between a fisher (F) and a market manager (M) conveys the sense of frustration with the timetables, and the constant negotiation. The fisher focused on the time of the sea (why not fishing on Fridays?) and missed sales opportunities (buyers want lobsters on Saturdays as well), while the market manager focused on the organizational constraints (the hierarchy, the rules):

> F: When buyers want shellfish on a Saturday, it's just impossible!
> M: Now, that has nothing to do with me! Go tell the boss.
> F: Hang on, I deal with M., I don't deal with anyone else. I keep telling buyers, "Oh, you aren't buying any lobster from me, you aren't taking any brown crab." But where is the lobster on Saturdays? "Oh, well, we don't do Saturdays! We're closed on Saturdays!"
> M: Yes, but that's not my fault. It has nothing to do with me.
> F: And then people wonder why business is down...
> M: We'll try to get some sales going on Saturdays.
> F: And when we come in during the afternoon—you don't want to sell in the afternoon either?
> M: I'm not against it. But it's complicated.

These problems disproportionately affected fishers. Buyers had more flexible work schedules and could organize their days around the logistics of the exchange. Remote buyers could participate in the 5:30 AM sale from a home office without any physical disruption at all. Fishers had no such option: the exchange required not just their fish but their fish at a specific dock by a specific hour. While the exchange's temporal structure was designed to create active competition between buyers (and it succeeded) this required making the schedule convenient for buyers. Fishers paid for that convenience in fuel costs, lost sleep, shortened fishing runs, and spoiled catches, and they perceived this asymmetry as unjust. The grievance expressed a distributional conflict, but a distinct kind. It arose because the exchange had to set its schedule to bring in as many buyers as possible, not because it tried to extract profits from fishers. To generate attractive prices, it had to allocate the burdens unevenly between the two sides.

Transparency vs. autonomy Transparency was constitutive of auction mechanism. It turned the price into a public, verifiable fact and created the competitive pressure that replaced the knowledge asymmetries fishers faced in bilateral negotiations. But the organizational apparatus required to produce that transparency - the logs, the documentation, the display infrastructure - made activities at the exchange legible far beyond what the auction itself required. That legibility, in turn, attracted regulatory attention that reached deep into fishers' occupational practices and constrained their autonomy. While the exchange's operations themselves were not regularly audited by external regulators, the practices of fishers increasingly were.

To operate effectively the exchange had to document quantities, identify vessels, grade quality, and maintain transaction records. As specified in the Local Operating Regulations, sellers must "declare tonnages with a margin of error of less than 20% of the total, to ensure the optimal allocation of personnel and logistics provided for landing and timely preparation for sale." The president of the OPN[4] explained how this documentation infrastructure, essential to the smooth functioning of the market, created a written trace that external authorities could use at will, especially on EU fishing quotas:

> "If the quota says 300 kg per person on board, if you have 4 men on board, your quota is 1.2 tons. A normal vessel will fish this amount in a few hours. Of course, they will stay

> out a little bit longer. The exchange is not obliged to enforce the quotas by law, but all quantities sold are registered. There's a written trace of what every fisher has reported and sold. The maritime authorities can ask about quantities for this or that boat at any time. So for the fishers, this is a constraint associated with the exchange. They come to the exchange to get higher prices, but in return, they have to open their books."

The market managers' efforts to build the documentation infrastructure that the auction required meant they collected precisely the information that regulators needed to check compliance. The Prefect, who represented the State, applied legal sanctions directly to non-complying fishers whenever the data supported it. The transparency regime thus became a helpful infrastructure for regulatory enforcement. And the regulatory load grew steadily. Since the 1980s, the EU had progressively normalized the commercialization of fish, creating sanitary standards, setting reserve prices, subsidizing producers' organizations, and implementing a resource conservation policy governing net mesh sizes, minimum fish sizes by species, and - most importantly for fishers - quotas (Perraudeau, Yves 2008). In fishers' view, these rules had become increasingly intrusive and burdensome.

This was true even when the regulations served fishers' long-term interests. Regulations on fish size, quotas, and traceability were designed to protect fish stocks and thereby fishers' own occupational stability. But most fishers saw the short-term impact on their profits. For example, to encourage the adoption of radar and sonar technologies that enabled more targeted fishing, a regulation was in discussion at the European Commission that compelled fishers to bring back undersized fish for the production of animal feed and surimi (sold at very low prices) instead of discarding them at sea. This 'landing obligation' was not enforced during the fieldwork but was already a matter of concern for fishers. What made this regulation potentially binding was the exchange's documentation infrastructure: because all quantities caught and sold were logged and all batches inspected, fishers feared that they would not be able to quietly discard undersized catch. They insisted the new regulation was incompatible with how they actually fished:

> "It's impossible. Look, everything falls into the skip at the rear, and then falls into the processing line, where it's sorted and put into baskets. There are holes for waste disposal, so everything that's not put into a basket is automatically disposed of at sea. In order to get one ton of marketable fish I need to catch three or four tons. If we don't throw the fish back, we have to put everything into baskets, so three-quarters of our catch won't be marketable. And what if I'm in the middle of a whole school of undersized fish? I bring them on board, I can't throw them back, and I can't sell them. It means additional costs for us, and no income"

The regulation was designed in the interest of fishers, but they refused to let regulators dictate how they plied their trade. The collision was mediated by the exchange's transparency apparatus: the documentation infrastructure, which was later modernized into even more stringent electronic logbooks and on-board cameras, constituted public prices and simultaneously extended regulatory reach into the heart of fishers' occupational craft: onto the boat and into the catch.

Cumulatively, the three tensions transformed how fishers perceived the exchange — most visibly in their objections to the fees that funded each piece of organizational infrastructure. One fisher named the form directly: "We've lost our freedom. We have to pay fees for this and that. This is an organization. It's set up to organize sales, and it taxes us constantly. […] after a little while they do more and more and we are just good to pay!" The quote is revealing because the fisher does not complain about fish prices or specific procedures; he complains about the organizational form itself. The exchange has become legible to him not as a marketplace that serves fishers but as an organization with its own logic of expansion. The OPN director confirmed the pattern: fishers who exited "hate words like 'tax' or 'fee'" and "prefer to sell at lower prices, even after the fees, to being forced to pay all these so-called taxes." Fishers preferred lower prices to the experience of being organized.

Disintermediation thus resolved each of the three encroachments. Direct sales bypassed the standardization apparatus. “Boats selling directly unload their catches at different times each day, so the veterinary services and inspectors cannot know when to go,” as the deputy director of the OPN explained; “there is no trace whatsoever.” Our own observation of direct sales confirmed this: a vessel unloaded fish directly onto the sun-exposed dockside without ice or protection, waiting 20 minutes for the buyer’s truck to arrive (see appendix photos)—practices unimaginable inside the exchange. Direct sales freed fishers from auction timetables: “their boats can unload at any time, at any place, and the wholesalers come to collect their goods.” And direct sales evaded the documentation apparatus that made fishers’ practices legible to regulators. Fishers paid a price for these escapes: prices in direct sales were lower, sometimes substantially. But as one fisher who sold exclusively direct put it: “We never get very high prices; but the main thing for me is that I’m not forced to use the fish market. I prefer to do it my way.” What fishers sought to escape was the experience of being subjected to an organizational machinery that interfered with craft autonomy. Table 2 juxtaposes each mechanism with the friction it produced.

Difficult Decoupling and Procedural Credibility

That fishers responded to occupational encroachment with the most radical option open to them, exit, is puzzling. Cherbourg was built to serve its members, so we might expect it to accommodate their grievances either by reforming its rules or by tolerating informal workarounds.

The first part of the answer is straightforward: formal reform was structurally difficult and slow. By 2006 an independent manager ran the Cherbourg market under a multi-layered regulatory framework. A local rulebook (the *règlement local d’exploitation*) codified the format, governance, and operation of the market. After a rule change in 1998, the manager had to draft any amendment in consultation with a council (the *conseil consultatif d’exploitation*) of producer organizations, buyers' associations, the host municipality, and the port authority, and the Prefect then had to ratify the rulebook by decree (*arrêté préfectoral*) once he had verified that it met the common minimum provisions set nationally and at the European level.[5] Formal change therefore took time and political work across both sides of the market. Because reform was slow and costly, the organizational literature would lead us to expect decoupling — the quiet toleration of workarounds — to keep fishers from leaving. Why, then, did managers allow the conflict to escalate until fishers left?

We answer in two steps. We first show that the exchange had to demonstrate its impartiality continually to ward off participants' suspicion, as the brokerage literature predicts (Fernandez and Gould 1994; Simmel 1950), and that visibly following its own procedures was a central means of doing so. But that evidence is not yet decisive to conclude that the need for procedural credibility is a distinct mechanism of 'difficult decoupling.' It cannot tell us whether managers refused to accommodate fishers because they needed to signal impartiality or because the procedures were also substantively important — technically necessary for the auction to produce high prices, or valued by an audience committed to them. It is the difference between substance and form that differentiates our explanation from those already found in the literature: tight coupling, internal commitment, and external monitoring. Each holds that rules matter for their substance, whether because they are operationally load-bearing (tight coupling) or because some audience is committed to them (internal commitment, external monitoring). We therefore proceed by elimination and present evidence that the substance of the rules was neither operationally necessary nor important to the audiences that might have enforced it. This allows us to conclude that it was the visible, uniform performance of the rules rather than their content that prevented decoupling.

Suspicion and the Performance of Impartiality

Cherbourg's standing as a neutral intermediary was constantly in doubt. Fishers in particular read each addition to the exchange's apparatus — new fees, new services, new requirements — as evidence of self-dealing. In one exchange, a fisher (F) confronted a manager (M) directly:

> F: Funny how the Exchange always seems fine. But what about the boats? Once we pay for the fuel and the fees, we're left with nothing. Ten percent fees — that's criminal.
> M: You don't pay ten percent!
> F: Are you serious? You wanna check the invoices?
> M: That's because you're counting the ice in that figure. But the ice is an extra service. It's separate from the commission.
> F: Yeah, whatever. To us, it's all the same money coming out of our pocket. It all adds up in the end, doesn't it? You make us pay for the ice, the transport... So many things!

The fisher here alludes darkly to his suspicions ("funny how the Exchange always seems fine"). Behind the statement lies the sense that the exchange has interests of its own — that "it is an organization" and will expand in ways that need not align with the fishers, even without a profit motive. The manager tries to defuse the charge by separating the exchange's commission from the price of ice, a cost generated by the cold-chain requirements of quality standardization. He effectively tries to preserve the exchange's standing as a neutral intermediary by recasting the charge for ice as a necessary cost that is merely passed through the exchange - rather than a profit margin of the exchange itself.

The clearest signal of impartiality managers could mobilize was adherence to stated procedure. For instance, the exchange had built, as one manager put it, "an excellent reputation for its rigor in sorting fish." Distance buyers, who never entered the building, relied entirely on that reputation. As another manager explained: "The most important thing is, they must be absolutely confident that what the sales catalog says is true." One buyer put it plainly: "There are classifications. And there are labels, so I can buy with my eyes shut!" That trust rested on the premise that the grading and the catalogue reflected a procedure applied uniformly to every box and every fisher. An informal exception — relaxing the inspection chain for a fisher who resented it — would make the exchange's impartiality unverifiable. A competing exchange that lacked this rigor had, the manager noted, "not a single distant buyer."

When fishers complained about fees, managers therefore answered in precisely this register, pointing out that everyone paid the same for the same services and rebuffing the charge of favoritism by appeal to equality before the exchange's procedures. For instance, explaining why occasional extra sales on weekends could not be granted, the director of the exchange said simply: "we're a *bureaucracy*: we have to comply with rules, we have staff, employment regulations." He invokes not the competitive logic of the auction but the form of the organization: a bureaucracy has to apply its rules visibly and uniformly to remain one. These statements suggest that the managers had to resist informal workarounds to convey their impartiality. During the observation of the offloading point in a secondary port that was equipped with weighing and labeling machines, the manager noticed some crates that had no labels. He explained how some fishers tried to work around the rules, and the sanctions imposed to fishers when they do so repeatedly:

> For example, there's a crate over there, I don't see a label. For the fishermen, it takes time when they return from the sea to process the goods through the machine. But they have to do it. When we come in the evening, we need to know that such-and-such boat has pollock, in such-and-such quantity. And they know they've delivered a certain amount to the fish market. All fishermen must go through this. We need to know what is coming in. And we re-sort everything over there, systematically, to check the quality. We have a hard time enforcing it; last year, we suspended a fisherman for 15 days because he hadn't done it.

Managers justified their refusals in the register of uniformity ("All fishermen must go through this"), and transparency ("We need to know"), especially for the distance buyers who sustained the auction premised their participation on accurate information and uniform grading. We call this constraint on decoupling *procedural credibility* — the intermediary's requirement to sustain participation by applying its stated rules to everyone alike and in the open. What must be maintained is not the specific substance of any given rule, but the uniform, public demonstration of adherence to it. This commitment to visible impartiality is what distinguishes procedural credibility from the three alternative mechanisms, each of which requires that the rules matter for their substance.

The positive evidence is not enough yet, though. Managers might have refused accommodation because the rules were substantively important after all. Distance buyers wanted accurate catalogues because they expected a certain quality in the fish they bought; a one-off Saturday sale would have handed an advantage to whoever knew of it. In each case a substantive reason sat alongside the symbolic one. To show that the managers were refusing to accommodate because they wanted to signal impartiality, rather than protect the substantial content of the rules, we turn to the places where a commitment to substance versus form do come apart — where managers tolerated deviations that carried real substantive costs, and where they compromised the auction's efficiency yet preserved its form.

Selective Tolerance: Ruling Out External Scrutiny

External scrutiny, as one of the three reasons decoupling can be foreclosed, is the easiest to discard. The exchange produced extensive records of transactions and products, but its own operations drew little outside attention. Its regulatory framework left the manager wide operational latitude, and no one monitored how he used it. The Prefect's statutory role was exhausted by ratifying the rulebook and withdrawing buyer accreditation, and the maritime administration was tied to the exchange only through the flow of transaction records, not through audits of its conduct.[6] The exchange could have decoupled informally without much external scrutiny. Resistance was therefore not based on fear of external consequences.

This becomes particularly apparent when looking at situations where the exchange *did* allow for informal workarounds. The quota system required fishers to report the quantities in their hold during their final hours at sea, so that the exchange could trace catches and prevent overfishing. One morning, the first author noticed that a fisher had announced 12 tons to the exchange but brought back 17, above the margin of error of 20% authorized by the Local Operating Regulations. In a frank conversation with the first author *and a manager*, he confessed with wry humor to routine circumvention:

> "For the mackerel, we messed up and didn't count right, so we thought there was less. And we had one ton of cod. We can't really be bothered with one ton, see what I mean? So we didn't tell them. We always play around with what's legal and what's not. Like for mackerel, we are not allowed to fish more than 10% of our authorized quota. So everything over the 10% is always fished on the last day, after we've sent the final updates to the exchange, at 2 a.m., see? [he laughs] We generally catch lots of fish in our last hours at sea!"

The manager reacted with pointed sarcasm: "What a coincidence! That's quite a lucky turn of events, all the same!" implying that he was in on the joke. Another fisher described the calculus more bluntly: "If I bring everything I catch to the fish market, I reach my quota within two and a half months! So, the rest of the year, we have to commit fraud or sell direct." Managers knew that fishers routinely exceeded quotas in their last hours at sea, after the final reporting window had closed. Precisely because this would have given the fishers a clear profit motive to leave the exchange, they engaged in a form of adaptive decoupling here (Bromley and Powell 2012): managers selectively looking the other way, absorbing the tension between regulatory demands and occupational practice through pragmatic complicity. The managers were concerned by the logistics of the market (the main reason why fishers had to declare tonnages) but they were not particularly worried about external scrutiny. To some extent, the market was able to adjust personnel and logistics to accommodate the extra quantities. Where the exchange's relation to the state was concerned, managers were willing to accommodate the fishers: they were not committed to the substance of the rules. Looking the other way put no participant at a disadvantage relative to another, and the indulgence extended to every fisher alike. The rules that managers refused to bend — grading, catalogue accuracy, schedules, fees — governed the relations among participants. An exception there would have favored one member over others, and both sides of the market could have read it as favoritism.

Formalizing the Informal

Decisive evidence against the assumption of a deep internal commitment arrived when managers undertook the very reform that had at first been foreclosed. Disintermediation had kicked off a vicious circle. Fishers and buyers, as one manager put it, were allying to "pull the rug from under the marketplace's feet." To halt the spiral, managers relaxed the organizational apparatus on each of the three dimensions we have described. But they did not do so through informal accommodation. Instead, they formalized various *informal* dynamics of direct sales in a series of initiatives. This was a slow process tested during the fieldwork, with a series of changes that weakened the core auction's allocative efficiency.

A first set of changes relaxed product quality standards to reward fishers' idiosyncratic quality judgments within the formal system — that is, the managers formalized certain aspects of fishers' craft. Regional labels such as the "Moules de Barfleur" and national labels such as the "Label Rouge" were adopted for products that met strict specifications. Classification into categories B, A, or E remained compulsory and 'top-down', but labels were voluntary and 'bottom-up', giving fishers the freedom to opt in. If they did, their craft could be acknowledged beyond standard classification, leading to higher revenues. Traditional methods were formalized: the

“Red Label,” for example, required fishers to bleed out, eviscerate, and rinse their fish immediately. As a trainer from the regional quality association explained:

> “The Normandie Fraîcheur Mer initiatives are voluntary, fishermen-led endeavors. For example regarding line-caught sea bass, it was the fishermen from [nearby harbors] who approached us. They wanted to add value to their product and stand out. So they worked with us to establish a set of specifications. In general, the set of specifications is established with the fishermen, validated by the fishermen, and then we set up a product-specific executive committee with a president and members, to enforce the specifications”

The last sentence highlights what was central to the exchange: translating the craft standards into something that could be codified and universally applied. A coastal fisher confirmed that labels had played a role in his decision to abandon direct sales:

> As far as I’m concerned, I fish seabass and red mullet, and it sells well. It’s a high-end product. You find it in classy restaurants, and if you try to sell direct you won’t get the same price. With the labels, I get around 20 euros for a seabass. Without the pin it’d be around 17 euros. So I get better prices through the exchange than I would get by selling direct.

The exchange also reorganized the auction sequence to put labeled fish first, so that buyers could recognize the beginning of the high-quality sequence, and began publishing qualitative comments for each box in the online sales catalogue. Each of these measures introduced precisely the particularism of fishers’ craft judgment that the auction’s grading scheme had been built to suppress. Labels distinguished individual fishers’ products within a grading system designed to treat all fish equivalently; qualitative comments individualized what standardization had made uniform. But because each was a formal procedure that had been announced, was governed by specifications, available to any fisher who met the criteria, and visible to all buyers, it did not erode the exchange’s credibility.

A second set of changes relaxed the requirements of temporal coordination. The exchange added flexibility to accommodate the rhythms of life at sea, while maintaining the grouping of sales within a short period to ensure competitive bidding. Instead of requiring all vessels to unload at the market docks by 4:30 a.m., refrigerated tanks were installed, primarily for shellfish fishers whose schedules were particularly at odds with the market's rhythm. Pick-ups of fish were organized in neighboring harbors, sparing vessels that docked nearby a costly trip to Cherbourg. As the development manager explained: "When you put a fish tank, you show the fishers that you care about their problems; and until recently, they didn't feel that they were listened to, especially the smaller fishers." The exchange also responded to the persistent demand for Saturday openings. Again, what matters is the form: a Saturday opening is a formally established, universally available schedule change, not an informal arrangement allowing one fisher to deliver outside hours while others cannot.

Finally, the exchange relaxed its core mechanism and created legal avenues for bilateral exchanges. The managers were aware that the auction created revenue uncertainty, and that direct sales, by locking in a price for a definite period, were considered safer by some fishers. The exchange began to experiment with "set agreements" — pre-negotiated arrangements between a buyer and a fisher, mediated by the development manager. The buyers and fishers did not meet during the process. Once an agreement was reached, the exchange mediated the transactions between the two sides and applied the regulations in the same way as it did for standard auction contracts. A fisher who had recently joined through a set agreement described how his work had changed: "I know the price, I know the quantities: it's all decided. So all I have to worry about is the quality." Set agreements introduced bilateral pricing into a system built on competitive auction - precisely the kind of accommodation fishers had been seeking through direct sales. They thinned the auction's liquidity and pricing efficiency by removing some buyers and sellers from it. But because the agreements were mediated by the exchange, governed by routinely renegotiated terms, and subject to the same regulations as standard contracts, they preserved the procedural character that the exchange's credibility required. If managers had internalized the auction's principles, they would have resisted these redesigns. They did not and, in fact, the formal program turned out to be negotiable. Fishers invested their identity in their craft, not in the exchange. Like the buyers and the managers, they treated the exchange as an instrument — a means to prices and volumes rather than a source of professional worth. This instrumental relation to the organization distinguishes marketplaces from the schools, firms, and bureaus where commitment-based foreclosure has been documented (Hallett 2010; Sauder and Espeland 2009; Turco 2012).

Signal over Substance

Finally, the evidence of the formal reforms allows us to rule out the most serious alternative as well: tight coupling (Brunsson 1989; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Orton and Weick 1990). On that account the exchange would have held to its procedures because they belonged to its technical core and relaxing them would have degraded the exchange's ability to beat the prices of direct sale. But the reforms show that each element of the organizational apparatus could be relaxed. Indeed, they could actively compromise the efficiency of the allocation mechanism but the exchange remained preferable to direct sale nonetheless. Set agreements make the point most forcefully: the very thing the exchange was trying to replace, bilateral exchanges, could be placed inside the exchange without collapsing the auction's independent ability to produce superior prices. The content of the rules was not, then, so tightly bound to the exchange's output as to be untouchable.

This supports our reading of the managers' insistence that the exchange had to act as a "bureaucracy." Internal audiences were not committed to its particular rules, external scrutiny was slight, and the content of the rules was not required to produce value over bilateral trade — yet managers still refused informal accommodation. They refused because the visible, uniform performance of the rules was what secured the exchange's legitimacy in the eyes of suspicious participants and thereby kept them at the market. This is what separates procedural credibility from tight coupling. Under tight coupling, the formal structure is bound to the technical core (i.e. the mechanical process by which transactions are struck), and relaxing it degrades output. Here the formal structure was bound to something else — the participation of voluntary members who had to be convinced that the exchange dealt with everyone alike. The decoupling literature treats this ceremonial layer as detachable from the operational one, as a decorative 'myth.' But in Cherbourg, that layer *became* operational in its own right. The exchange could compromise elements of the auction, but not the public, universal form through which those compromises were made.

Discussion and conclusion

The literature on market intermediation traces conflicts between parties and intermediary to divergent profit motives (Chen et al. 2022; Rochet and Tirole 2006), issues of labor control (Fourcade and Healy 2024; Stark and Pais 2021; Vallas and Schor 2020), or the structural asymmetry at the heart of the broker's ability to create value for their clients (Burt and Opper 2024; Kwon et al. 2020). These accounts have paid little attention to the organizational dynamics and requirements of intermediation itself. By contrast, the Cherbourg case reveals that the organizational apparatus of intermediation can be an independent source of conflict. Once the vocabulary of organizational theory is brought to bear, the case also reveals that a standard tool to handle conflicts in organizations – decoupling – does not apply for reasons that have to do with the structural position of the intermediary. In short, the case bridges research on decoupling and market intermediation by taking an organizational perspective on conflict in intermediation. This yields three distinct contributions.

First, the paper suggests that the demands of effective intermediation reverberate beyond the marketplace where they *encroach* on producers' practical life. This is primarily an organizational issue: techniques to make the world legible tend to shape it simultaneously (Fourcade and Johns 2020; Scott 2020). By contrast with organizations whose structure shapes work within them, the organizational apparatuses of the exchange encroached into occupational practices outside of the four walls of the market, into the very working life of the fishers. This is likely to happen whenever formal market organization spills over into professions that are characterized by a distinct *craft culture* that values autonomy and individualism (Ranganathan 2018). We would expect similar problems to emerge in markets for agricultural goods or artisanal products – and regardless of whether the exchange has an independent profit motive. Whether more bureaucratically organized professions (Stinchcombe 1986) absorb such encroachments more easily is a question for future research.

The possibility of such conflicts matters analytically beyond the idiosyncratic case of Cherbourg because it establishes a counterfactual baseline for the exploitative cases the literature has focused on. For instance, sociological research on the platform economy has often analogized transaction platforms to Fordist factories (Ravenelle 2019; Wang and Tomassetti 2024), where the plight of workers is a direct reflection of capitalists' efforts to increase surplus extraction (Griesbach et al. 2019). Strategy research has likewise noted that persistent grievances among gig workers erode the network effects on which platform profits depend (Gu and Zhu 2021). In contrast, our paper suggests that grievances may also arise from occupational encroachment: the organizational costs that effective intermediation imposes on participants' work regardless of whether the intermediary seeks to profit from it. The two sources are analytically distinct but indistinguishable in experience: to those who bear them, the costs of being organized are indistinguishable from the costs of being exploited. Disentangling them requires bringing the intermediary's operations into the analysis rather than working from participants' experience alone. By showing which grievances are the cost of intermediation, it becomes possible to identify more clearly which ones can be attributed to rent seeking.

A second contribution runs from the literature on intermediation to that on organizations. The standard accounts of "difficult" decoupling — internalization (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Turco 2012), external monitoring (Bromley and Powell 2012; Horvath 2023; Kaufmann et al. 2025) and tight coupling (Orton and Weick 1990) – locate the limits of decoupling in the substantive importance of the rules. Decoupling fails, on each account, because the rules matter to someone or something: to an internal audience that has internalized them, to an external audience that monitors them, or to the technical core that depends on them. What makes procedural credibility distinct is that it forecloses decoupling even when the substance of the rules matters to no one. What has to be preserved is the visible fact of applying them equally to everyone, not their content.

An intermediary that stands between mutually suspicious parties must continually demonstrate that it deals with everyone alike, and adherence to stated procedure is the primary vehicle of that demonstration (Burt 2002; Simmel 1950; Stovel et al. 2011). In our case, the exchange held to its procedures not because departing from them would have degraded the auction's output (this is precisely what saved the exchange in the end) but because following them visibly and uniformly was how the broker showed counterparties that no self-dealing was occurring. The perceived fairness at stake here differs from procedural justice as social psychologists have discussed it (Lind and Tyler 1988): participants do not need to judge the procedures fair, or value their content, for uniform adherence to secure the perception of the intermediary's neutrality. Symbolic adherence does operational work in its own right: it sustains participation independently of whether the rules are technically necessary or valued by any audience. The old insight about the ambivalent position of the broker (Fernandez and Gould 1994) thus enters the organizational literature as a new mechanism of difficult decoupling: procedural credibility. Stating the mechanism this way also clarifies its scope, and resolves a contrast we posed earlier: profit-oriented platforms decouple routinely, while Cherbourg could not. Three conditions produce the need for procedural credibility: participation must be voluntary on both sides, exit must be cheap, and the intermediary's neutrality must be contested. Gig platforms typically escape the first two conditions. Their workers depend on the platform for income and face costly exit, so the platform can hold them through dependency rather than credibility (Curchod et al. 2020; Schüßler et al. 2021). Wherever exit is cheap, we would expect platforms to encounter the constraint.

Taken together, these two contributions describe a single predicament. The apparatus that generates occupational encroachments is the same apparatus whose visible, uniform enactment sustains the exchange's claim to impartiality. The exchange therefore could not informally ease the frictions it created without surrendering the credibility that held its members. This is the double bind of formalized intermediation: the arrangements that create frictions are also those that the intermediary cannot relax informally.

The exchange's escape from this bind highlights a third contribution to research on market design. Sociological research on market design has shown that marketplaces often fail because the political, organizational, and occupational demands of their construction exceed the capabilities of their designers (Reverdy and Breslau 2019; Rilinger 2025; Shestakofsky 2024).

While this perspective directs attention to different factors than market designers and economists themselves consider (Hitzig 2020; Roth 2008), it is broadly consistent with the idea that ideal theories of markets can be realized through appropriate institutional design.

Our paper raises the possibility of a different class of failure: market design success can be self-defeating. A well-designed organizational apparatus can fail to sustain membership because its reach into adjacent social domains drives participants out. These constraints are endogenous to operation and cannot be fully specified in advance: they depend on how participants respond to the apparatus (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Participants may reject features of the exchange that actively support their profits when those features disrupt other parts of their working lives. In this sense, market design can fail even when it succeeds: the organizational systems of effective intermediation can undermine the participation required to keep the market alive. Yet, an intermediary can survive the success of its own design by trading formal efficiency for continued membership — provided the trade is made through formal reform rather than informal discretion to ensure procedural credibility. Attending to what an intermediary must do, and must be seen to do, brings into view a class of tensions that the study of brokers, platforms, and exchanges has yet to reckon with, and that grows more consequential as more of economic life is organized through formalized intermediaries.

NOTES

[1] Source: https://www.wikimanche.fr/Port_de_pêche_de_Cherbourg and the website of Cherbourg Harbor (https://portsdenormandie.fr/fr/ports/port-de-cherbourg)

[2] Under standard assumptions, descending-clock auctions are strategically equivalent to first-price sealed-bid auctions and allocate each lot to the buyer with the highest valuation (Klemperer 2013; Milgrom 2021). The equivalence fails when buyers' valuations are not independent, as was often the case in practice.

[3] For example, on the night we were able to obtain a full price list, quality E cod was being sold at an average of €4.61 a kilo, and quality B cod at €2.68 (there was no quality A). Quality E Dover sole was being sold at an average of €11.70 a kilo, quality A at €10.47, and quality B at €4.36.

[4] 'Organisation des Pêcheurs Normands' (Organization of Normandy Fishers)

[5] First laid out in the *Décret n° 89-273 du 26 avril 1989*, as substantially amended by Décret n° 98-1211 du 28 décembre 1998. The national laws, in turn, are shaped at broader level by EU regulations, chiefly the Reg. (EC) 104/2000 on the common organization of fisheries markets and Reg. (EC) 2406/96 on common marketing standards to ensure fishers a minimum level of income (in particular the recognition and role of producer organizations).

[6] Laid out in Décret n° 98-1211 du 28 décembre 1998.

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Tables and figures

Table 1 - Data

Interview Data *45 int., approx. 20 hours*	Observational Data *Approx. 100 hours*	Archival Data, *Approx. 1000 pages*
FORMAL INTERVIEWS - Buyers (9) including distance buyers (3) - Fishers (13) including fishers active in both the marketplace and informal channels (5) - Outside authorities (3) including the regional director of the fisheries committee, the director of the professional association of fishers, and the director of the regional fishers' cooperative - Market staff (11) including the director; the development manager; the quality manager; the chief auctioneer; sales inspectors (3); administrative staff (4) INFORMAL INTERVIEWS during work (with market staff) - Development manager (x5)	- Market sales: Pre-auction, auction room during sale, and after-sale, from midnight to 9am (x5) - Weekday administrative work in the market offices, from 9am to 5pm (x5) - ½ day Fishers' work in the mussels' annex in Barfleur (x1) - Fishers' unofficial direct sales (x2) - Remote buying (x2) including an international broker (working from his home) and a large fish-processing company	REGULATORY DOCUMENTS (regulations in force during data collection) National (also accessed via legifrance.gouv.fr): - Rural and Maritime Fishing Code (in particular Articles L. 932-5 and D. 932-8 to D. 932-18, dedicated to the operation of fish wholesale auctions / halles à marée); - Decrees: Decree No. 94-660 establishing the general conditions for maritime fishing ; and Decree No. 89-273 and subsequent 1998 versions relating to the first sale of maritime fishery products; Decree No. 58-560 of June 28, 1958, authorizing the practice of auctions in venues designated for the shipping or wholesale of agricultural and fishery foodstuffs and products; Decree No. 99-1064 of December 15, 1999, relating to the sanitary conditions for the production and placing on the market of live shellfish; - Order of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries: Order of November 2, 2005, relating to the landing declaration, sales notes, and related reporting obligations for maritime fishery products; Order of July 25, 1994, establishing the sanitary rules for the purification and shipping of live shellfish; Order of January 30, 1997, establishing the transport conditions for live shellfish prior to shipping. EU (accessed via eur-lex.europa.eu) - Support to the sector: (EC) No 2792/1999 laying down the detailed rules and arrangements regarding Community structural assistance in the fisheries sector; - Fish standardization and quotas: (EC) No 847/96, (EC) No 2371/2002, (EC) No 811/2004, (EC) No 768/2005, (EC) No 2115/2005, (EC) No 2166/2005, (EC) No 388/2006 - Organization of fish markets: (EC) No 104/2000 establishing a common organisation of the markets in the sector of fishery and aquaculture products. REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS' DOCUMENTS CCI: Cherbourg-Cotentin Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Summary report on the Common Organisation of the Markets Lower Normandy Region, Economic and Social Council, Report on economic activities generated by fishing and shellfish farming in Lower Normandy, October 2006. Cherbourg harbor website (cherbourg-port.fr) Interprofessional association OFIMER [National Interprofessional Office for Sea and Aquaculture Products]: Annual report 2006; research and advisory report concerning price formation for fresh seafood products, 2006; product classification criteria Producer organisations: list of agreed withdrawal prices by product, 2006 and 2007 Buyers: Presentation brochure of one of the exchange's major buying groups.

- Warehousemen (4)

INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

- Activity report 2006
- Local Operating Regulations of the Cherbourg Fish Wholesale Auction
- Price listings
- Sales catalogues for buyers, announcing species, size, quality, and weight by vessel (3 samples)
- Sample sales note for a vessel
- Groupement qualité des marins-pêcheurs, criées et mareyeurs de Basse-Normandie [Quality Association of Commercial Fishers, Auctions, and Wholesalers of Lower Normandy]: Activity report 2006; take-onboard product grading grid for European lobster and John Dory fish; samples of frameworks, including the guide to good practices on board vessels alongside the specific product specifications for high-value regional species such as line-caught sea bass, Normandy King scallops, Normandy lobster, 'Extra' grade wild fish, and Barfleur mussels.
- Follow-up audit report on quality grading at the fish auction 2007
- Sample communication leaflets for specific quality labels, including the Barfleur Mussels, and Label Rouge Normandy King scallop.

Table 2 – Occupational Encroachments: Collisions between Organizational Apparatus and Fishers' Craft

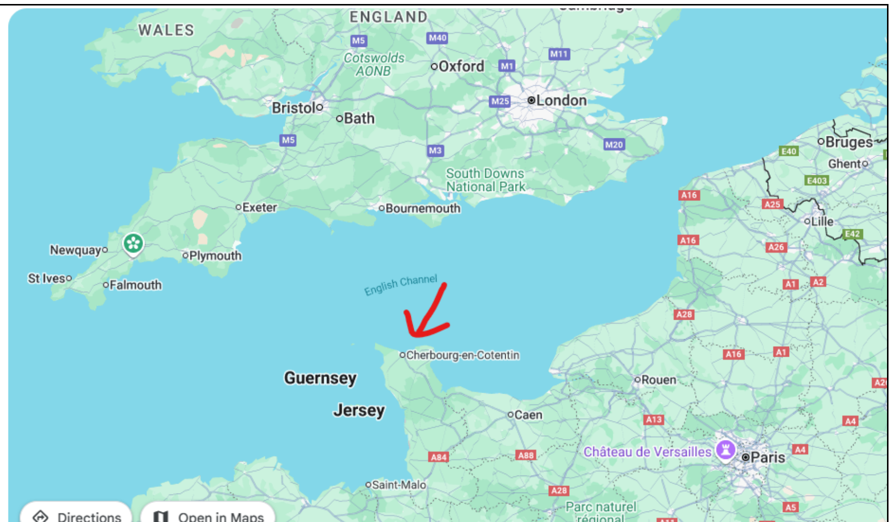
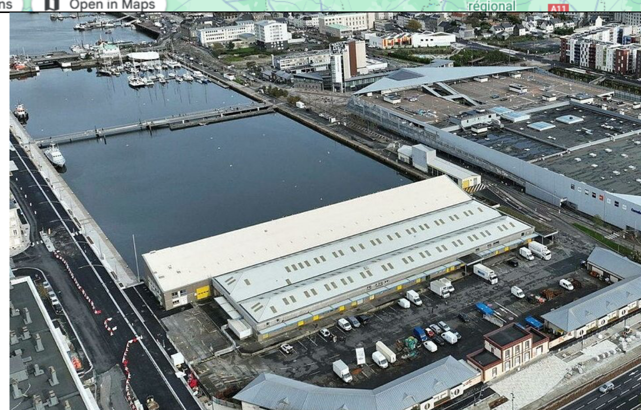
Apparatus element	Empirical examples	Coordination function inside the exchange	Resulting friction with craft
Product standardization	grading categories, quality classifications	Renders heterogeneous catches comparable; produces the equivalence that competitive bidding requires	Conflicts with fishers' craft judgments about quality and the appropriate care of the catch
Temporal coordination	5:30 AM auction, pre-auction display window	Concentrates buyers simultaneously around all available fish	Clashes with the rhythms of the fishing day; misaligns market time with sea time
Transparent documentation	sales logs, traceability records	Produces public prices and verifiable transactions; sustains buyers' trust in the catalogue	Constrains autonomy at sea; exposes occupational practice to enforcement

Table 3 – Procedural Credibility

Mechanism	What forecloses informal accommodation	Implication for formal redesign	View of ceremony
Internal commitment (Sauder & Espeland 2009; Hallett 2010; Turco 2012)	Members value formal procedures and refuse the charade of purely legitimating discourse	May also be resisted unless new rules satisfy members' commitments	Hypocrisy
Monitoring / Transparency (Bromley & Powell 2012; Kaufmann et al. 2025)	Monitors detect operational deviation from formal procedure	Generally available if changes satisfy monitors	Hypocrisy
Tight coupling (Orton & Weick 1990)	Procedures do substantive technical work that any relaxation would degrade	Foreclosed: the apparatus cannot be changed without degrading core product.	Substantive description of operations
Procedural credibility (this paper)	Informal exceptions read as broker favoritism, regardless of content	Formal changes are public, universal, and announced as rules	Ceremony is itself operational

Appendix. General presentation of the Cherbourgh 'Halle à marée' and site pictures

General

Geographical situation	
Bird-eye view of the market	
The market dock in the afternoon.	

Background

In France, fish markets are integral to official fish harbours, which are designated and maintained by the State. The State provides and upholds essential infrastructure like quays and wet docks. In France, 42 of the 65 fish harbours operate a fish market. Typically, fishermen sell their catch to wholesalers or fish traders, who then resell it to fishmongers, restaurateurs, or smaller merchants. Fish markets operate therefore as business-to-business (B2B) production markets, between the fishermen and fish traders. The Cherbourg Fish Market is managed by SPL Cherbourg Port, a public entity also responsible for the ferry terminal and the marina (https://www.cherbourg-port.fr/homepage/). A team of 23 employees oversees daily operations, including fish and shellfish sorting and sales, administrative tasks, and market development.

The original system and its downfall

Before the 1960s, transactions were direct. In this system, buyers and fishermen would negotiate on the quay, sealing deals with a handshake and immediately transferring fish from boat to truck. This system was heavily skewed in favour of buyers due to significant information asymmetry. Buyers exploited the perishability of the goods, the fishermen's urgent need to sell, and their unilateral assessment of quality and quantity, leading to harsh price negotiations. As the director of the Fishermen's professional association told the first author, "In this system, fishermen are systematically ripped off by the wholesalers, because the fishermen can be the best fishermen in the world, they can have the best fish in the world, they would always have to do with wholesalers who are businessmen, while they're really not."

A telling folk story from the Cherbourg fish market illustrates this imbalance. In the 1960s, a wholesaler's ostentatious display of a new, stunning car, purchased at the Paris automobile fair, deeply insulted the local fishermen. As the story goes, it was a unique model, white and red with chrome spokes! This "last straw" ignited their resolve to gain control of their destiny and advocate for a new market system.

The Rise of Auction Systems

Between 1960 and 1970, driven by local fishermen's committees and cooperatives, traditional fish markets were gradually replaced by modern fish halls all over France. These new markets centralized supply and demand, promoting price transparency by publicly disclosing sale outcomes. Designed as auction markets, they were seen as the fairest option for fishermen.

Over time, human auctioneers shouting prices were replaced by silent, electronic auction systems. This digitization dramatically sped up sales, reduced administrative costs, and automated back-office tasks like invoicing, bookkeeping, tracking, and statistics. It also generated a wealth of detailed sales data. Crucially, digitization enabled remote buyers to participate without physically inspecting the fish, a practice that now accounts for most transactions.

The auction system offers fishermen significant guarantees, especially when prices are low. Regulations set minimum prices for various fish types, and agreements with fishermen's cooperatives ensure fish is purchased if prices fall below a certain threshold (the ‘reserve price’).

The Cherbourg Market electronic auction system was developed by Agisoft Engineering, a local company, as Dutch (descending) auctions, in the early 2000s.

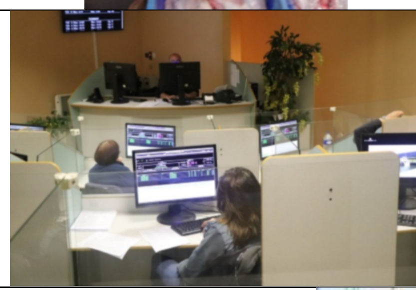
Comprehensive Services and Market Influence

Fish markets provide a comprehensive suite of services from the moment a boat docks. They handle unloading, sorting, quality checks, and information dissemination before the sale, relieving fishermen of logistical burdens. They manage the sale process itself, including all paperwork. After a sale, the market publishes all price and quality information. This data serves as a crucial reference point for transactions occurring outside the fish market, including direct sales or even black market activities. We first contacted the director of the Cherbourg Market, who was also the president of the Association of Directors of Auction Fish Markets in France (Association des Directeurs et Responsables des Halles à Marée de France). He told us how he was trying to restructure the market and its organization to respond to an increasing number of fishermen bypassing it.

Pictures

All photos by the first author unless stated.

In the market, the fish is unloaded from the boats directly in crates, washed at low temperature by market employees (picture on the left), sorted and put back in crates with ice (picture on the right).	 
The fish is prepared for display: each box is weighted on a scale, and checked once more (picture on the left). Crates are then labelled and arranged by type, size and quality in the refrigerated display hall (picture on the right).	 

The display hall (photo from a buyer visiting the hall), https://poissonnerie-lesaintpierre.fr/criee-de-cherbourg/	
The sales room during a morning sale	
Direct sales: the fish is unloaded directly on the dock, in the afternoon sun, with no ice. A fisher uses a hose to wash the fish directly on the dock pavement. This would not be allowed under the market's stricter hygiene rules.