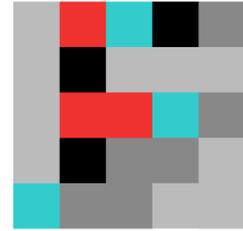# CONTROVERSIES
# & CONSPIRACIES

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*Conceptual boundaries and empirical practices*

**FORCCAST**

In the framing of today's social problems, the significant proliferation of conspiracy theories challenges controversies and raises concerns. While some social scientists have tackled conspiracy theories by blaming the actors' irrationality (Bronner, 2013) or defending a "necessary response to a risky and globalized world" (Knight, 2000), science and technology studies have, mostly, cautiously ignored the overlaps between controversies and conspiracies. The notion of controversy has however been (mis)used on several occasions: creationists urge to "symmetrically teach the controversy" (Cecarelli, 2011), tobacco industries and climate change skeptics deliberately cast doubt to keep controversies alive (Oreskes and Conway, 2010), emphasizing the urgent need to work on this concept. This issue is also a pedagogical one: "Mapping controversy" courses, especially in the high school, can sometimes be seen as a Trojan horse, allowing conspiracy theories to enter in the classroom as a legitimate subject of debate.

Conspiracy theories challenge an already problematic definition of sociotechnical controversies on **three dimensions**, which will influence the programme of this summer school:

- A shared focus on dissenting expertises, and a thorough study of technical and material evidences, therefore highlighting the need for a more accurate definition of *sociotechnical* controversies.
- these forms of dispute are now identified as social and historicized ones, that belong to a common repertoire and can sometimes be mobilized as such. For example, some conspiracies strategically mimic controversies in order to spread ignorance.
- An understanding through massively available digital footprints. By the use of the semantic field of "networks", they support the existence of a new regime of knowledge production, and propose methods to deal with it.

So many reasons to open the black-box and distinguish controversies from what they are not. This summer school aims to gather a group of scholars and teachers, and involve them in the collective production of concepts, research and pedagogical methods, around the following question: **Is controversy mapping fit to tackle conspiracy theories, and how?**

## 1 / A shared focus on dissenting expertise and material evidence

Science and technology studies have successfully challenged traditional conceptions of expertise, and highlighted the role of lay people in the coproduction of knowledge, via hybrid collectives (Rabeharisoa and Callon, 2002), lay expertise (Epstein, 1998), or the public uptake of controversies (Wynne, 1992). The role of whistleblowers (Chateauraynaud and Torny, 2000) has also been properly acknowledged in many ecological and biomedical controversies. As Luc Boltanski (2014) puts it: "*In these affairs, the work of unveiling, relayed by journalists, is attributed to 'whistle blowers', individuals or associations whose credibility rests on claims of expertise independent of the official agencies that have sought to exclude them, reduce them to silence or persecute them.*"

Conspiracy theories take root in this loss of credibility from official agencies; at the same time, as Bruno Latour (2012) pinpoints it, the identification of whistle blowers as "paranoids" is a threat to the detection of real conspiracies and the accusation of real conspirators.

Another blurry line between sociotechnical analyses and conspiracies concerns the focus on the materiality and technicality of evidence in the understanding of social and political problems. "*The more acrimonious the polemic, the smaller the scale on which the components of the event in the dispute - the angle of the shot, the impact of the bullets, some detail of an autopsy and so on - require the intervention of experts. Whether these experts have an official mandate or not [...] the data they supply are interpreted, once they are made public, as if they emanated from scientists discussing the results of an experiment*" (Boltanski, 2014)

## 2 / "Controversy" mobilized as a social, historicized form of dispute

From tobacco industries to climate change skeptics, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (2010) analyzed how some "merchants of doubts" had an agenda to keep controversies alive by spreading confusion, after a scientific consensus had been reached. Among other studies (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2009; Markowitz and Rosner, 2002; Proctor, 1996), those authors contributed to unmask some forms of agnotology (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008), a deliberate production of ignorance.

The pernicious actors described by those works, such as the Bush administration (Mooney, 2005), do not play "by the rules" of the controversy: they mimic scientific disputes, and, even more disturbingly, pretend to disclose some conspiracies themselves, by depicting the normal steps of peer-reviewing, editing, and more globally the entire social process of producing a scientific consensus (Collins, 1975), as a plot. Moreover, once unveiled, the uncertainty they created can still inhibit action (Latour, 2012).

Controversies then appear as a social and historicized form of dispute, belonging to a common repertoire. Shaped within science studies, the word and form "controversy" has recently been promoted by Intelligent Design advocates as a slogan: "*Teach the controversy*"

(Cecarelli, 2011), to deny the epistemological role of scientific consensus (Fuller, 2013 and Cecarelli, 2013).

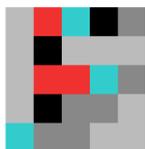## 3 / Is controversy mapping fit to analyze "real" conspiracies?

In *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, Boltanski (2014) underlines that sociology does not deal with already legally or technically accepted entities, but theorizes the existence and influence of not yet recognized collectives, therefore being constantly exposed to the risk of being reported as a plain conspiracy theory. Controversy mappings, based on the actor-network theory, are not designed to unveil "networks" thought as illegitimate relations among individuals, or connivances. They enact the statement that sociological research should focus on following the processes in which actors themselves assemble, name or stabilize new collectives (Latour, 2005), thus positively "liquidating conspiracies" (Boltanski, 2014).

On the contrary, according to some scholars, the analysis of those complex reconfigurations is blind to some structural processes and thus might miss some real conspiracies. Unfit to gender perspective (Haraway, 1988) controversy studies would "*praise mixity and social affairs in an ongoing, positive and constructive repossession, nonetheless missing a lot: capitalism and exploitation, issues of power and domination, market autonomy set against democratic entities, losers among globalization...*" (Pestre, 2007)

Controversy mapping as a method may nevertheless describe and analyze vivid social issues. Marc-Olivier Padis (2015) asserts that the recent development of irrational opinion (the growing belief in rumours and conspiracies) is not as much linked to an ideological blackout or to the development of the Internet *per se*, as to the emergence of a new regime of knowledge production, taking the form of massively available digital footprints. As the traditional categories shaped by politics and social sciences fail to capture these, some research programmes and centers- conceptually close to controversy mapping- are nowadays processing such data.

## Goals and expectations

This summer school aims to gather 25 to 30 students, scholars or teachers, interested and willing to intensely contribute to the collective production of concepts, research and pedagogical methods to deal with the issue of "controversies & conspiracies". Participants will share their own research works and experience through workshops and a few selected short talks. A comprehensive reading list will be sent beforehand, so that every participant will be able to contribute directly with his/her insight.

# Controversies & Conspiracies

2016 FORCCAST Summer school

Paris // September 5 - 7 //

**FORCCAST**

**SciencesPo**
MÉDIALAB

27, rue Saint-Guillaume

75007 Paris

### Preliminary programme

#### Monday 5

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| Morning | // | Keynote speech by Luc Boltanski: *REALITY versus reality* |
| | | discussion by Bruno Latour |
| Afternoon | // | Workshop *Mapping conspiracy theories - the cases of chemtrails and 9/11 planes* |
| | | Talks and roundtable *The demarcation of socio-technical controversies from conspiracies - beyond dissenting expertises and material evidence* |

#### Tuesday 6

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|---|---|---|
| Morning | // | Talks and roundtable *Mobilizing and mimicking controversy as a social and historicized form of dispute* |
| Afternoon | // | Conference by guest speaker Kyle McGee, lawyer, on *Class actions and socio-technical legal analyses;* followed by a workshop on *Evidence and public proof* |

#### Wednesday 7

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| Morning | // | Talks and roundtable *Is controversy mapping fit to analyze "real" conspiracies?* |
| Afternoon | // | Final workshop of collective production |

*The summer school will be limited to 25-30 participants. The language will be English. This event is free of charges (including lunches). Participants are expected to organize their own travel and accommodation.*

- CALL FOR APPLICATIONS - **deadline: May 22, 2016** -

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You can share your related ongoing research through workshops and open discussions, or propose a talk that will be included in the final programme. In both cases, please fill out the following form in order to apply: http://goo.gl/forms/otLUlpyNNs

The participants will be selected according to the following criteria: contribution through finished or ongoing research works, teaching activity (present or forthcoming), variety of disciplinary (within STS or beyond) and international backgrounds. All applicants will be notified early June.

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