Panel 15 - Session 1: Boundary struggles: truth, interest and epistemic authority in a changing world

Time: Wednesday, 28/June/2023: 2:30pm - 4:30pm · *Location:* Aula Unione 2
Session Chair: Luigi Pellizzoni
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Topics: The value of science, technology, innovation and research practices

Keywords: boundary struggles, truth, epistemic authority, technoscientific conflict, conflicts of interest

Although debated for a long time, the demarcation between expert knowledge and common sense has seen an evolution linked to social and technological changes in recent years.

The tension between conflicting dynamics of i) evidence-based policy making, ii) digital platformization of everyday life and news consumption and iii) the progressive loss of relevance of factual evidence in both public opinion forming and decision-making processes [a reconstruction of a quite turbulent debate is provided by Pellizzoni 2019] not only (re)brings to the fore the debate on the demarcation of epistemic authority [Gieryn 1983], but also requires that the issue be addressed taking into account the changing political, technological and social context.

The topic of health protection in emergency conditions, for instance, has become an issue on which ordinary citizens now feel they can actively intervene, making a useful contribution [Collins e Evans 2002: 236]. From another point of view, the increasing production of Big Data in medicine and science is transforming global healthcare and patient participation, by replacing the traditional expert knowledge with impersonal "expert systems [Dash et al. 2019]. It should also be noted how the "positioned" nature of "expert" viewpoints, not only outside, but also within so-called "official" or "orthodox" science, has become increasingly salient. Some of the most recent conflictual instances of public relevance – not only the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the conflict in Ukraine and the climate emergency – have in fact made evident that the (un?)deliberate confusion between the figure of the scientist (generalisable but perfectible knowledge) and that of the expert (contextual but effective knowledge with respect to the problem) creates insidious short-circuits between the request for reliance and the discharge of responsibility.

Even though the topic of "post-truth" seems to have lost momentum, what the expression implies has by no means waned in importance, with a shift from the classic "archetypal" conception of "truth" to a "prototypical" conception [Nordmann 2017].

Given the context above, submissions are solicited on, among others, the following themes:

1. epistemic struggles as conflicts of interests and boundary demarcation within the «orthodox» scientific community or between «official» scientific knowledge and alternatives;
2. relevant discoveries in the construction of the "expert" and "counter-expert";
3. the symmetry postulate: its potentialities, and possible side effects (e.g. false balance, relativism, science-related populism, etc.).
4. truth, post-truth and competing understandings of truth in the debate over the societal diffusion of technoscience, and its unintended and unpredicted socio-ecological "side effects";
5. the contrast between "expert" and Big Data knowledge in determining citizens and patients decision-making process in science related issues.

References
Collins, Evans, 2002 3rd wave of science studies, in «Social studies of science», 32
Dash, Shakyawar, Sharma, Kaushik, 2019   Big data in healthcare, in «Journal of Big Data», 6
Gieryn, 1983   Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science, in «American sociological review»
Nordmann, 2017   Vanishing friction events and the inverted Platonism of technoscience, Routledge
Pellizzoni, 2019 Innocent, Guilty or Reluctant Midwife? On the Reciprocal Relevance of STS and Post-truth, in «TECNOSCIENZA», 10

An exploration of the infodemic imaginaries emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic

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COVID-19 lockdowns have impacted every dimension of social life. Moreover, the constant risk of being infected by the SARS-COV-2 virus threatened the ordinary experience of individuals and social groups. This health emergency is a large-scale crisis, which yielded a "symbolic and emotional force" (Alexander, 2018) influencing risk perception and guiding social action. In this context, the communicative dimension played an essential role. Infodemic, considered as a form of symbolic "contamination" (Douglas, 2021; Camorrino and Savona, 2023), seems to have intensified the pre-existing condition of uncertainty and

anguish produced by the risk of contagion. The different positions of truth within the same scientific community (Giddens, 1994), the "viral spread" of data and information, sometimes erroneous or conflicting, the dissemination of fake news and alternative visions to the mainstream (Bloomfield et. al., 2021; Gruzd et al., 2021) shaped different "imaginaries", which, in turn, affected how individuals and groups responded to the pandemic. Our contribution aims to explore the diverse "infodemic imaginaries" (Durand, 2013; Camorrino and Savona, 2023) (e.g., ecospiritual, techno-scientific, conspirative) emerged during the COVID-19 crisis in Italy: each of these imaginaries is based on peculiar "universe of meaning" (Berger and Luckmann, 2020) and truth positions. To this aim, we adopted a qualitative approach, by in-depth interviewing, also by using a photostimulus technique, individuals belonging to foreign and local communities in Naples: in this way, we aimed to capture how the infodemic contributed to the production of diverse ways to "imagine" the pandemic, as well as the individuals' and social groups' diverse "emotional responses" (Lupton, 2003) to risk and uncertainty, linking such responses to the imaginary in which they were embedded. The study contributes to the understanding of how the dimension of imaginary affects the perception and management of collective events, especially with reference to the critical ones.

Boundary struggles and epistemic authority in international environmental assessments: the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment

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Recent debates in STS have identified a transition in environmental expertise and international assessments from "global environmental assessments" (GEAs) to "solutions-oriented assessments" (SOAs). In simple terms, a GEA is an assessment of evidence for biophysical changes in the global environment. SOAs focus on finding solutions to the problems posed by these changes. However, STS scholars ask (1) how do SOAs challenge traditional perceptions of the boundary between science and politics used by expert organizations? (2) What is the agency of expert organizations in making epistemic authority? (3) What new challenges for social inclusion arise from SOAs?

This presentation will seek to answer these questions using ethnographic evidence from the ongoing Transformative Change Assessment conducted by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The presented is an author in this assessment. Transformative Change refers to the future changes in society and ecology needed to achieve biodiversity and sustainability targets. It is an example of an SOA because it combines scientific projections about future impacts with social and cultural values about what different futures should be.

Evidence so far suggests that discussions about transformative change within the assessment are shaped by predefined boundaries within the authors and leadership team between "social" and "natural" science and by an unwillingness to let "pluralism" interfere with implementing objectives defined by traditional GEA work or by culturally specific ecocentric values. These norms also shape attempts to engage with stakeholders, such as indigenous worldviews. Discussions about co-production of problems and solutions are also affected by rules developed by IPBES for its previous GEA assessments. The presentation will use these insights to outline lessons for understanding stakeholder engagement within SOAs and expert organizations, and for the agency of international assessments in normatively contested debates about acceptable futures around the world.

Civilising communication infrastructures in the contemporary era: how dominant communication pathways support authoritative knowledges within civilisations, and the crisis of our civilisation's current communication transformation

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While infrastructure has emerged as a central concept in both STS and media studies (Bonini & Magaudda 2022), the media work of Harold Innis offers insights into an infrastructural understanding of media (Young 2017) that have still yet to be fully explored . The key concept of "civilisation" in his work offers a possible re-framing of the position of knowledge and of different knowledges within a spatially and temporally coherent, very large, macro-structure with dominant media of communication historically responsible for both the development and limitations of particular types of knowledge within each civilisation
Innis's concept of "monopolies of knowledge" points to how socio-material configurations of communication within a civilisation defines the limits of acceptable knowledge within that civilisation, including what knowledge was most authoritative (Carey 1967), as well as the standards by which the legitimacy of knowledge is assessed (Carey 2009). Innis' statements on the matter tend towards the broad and general, without a great deal of in-depth focus on a specific example. By putting Innis' broad overview on the position of knowledge into dialogue with Bruno Latour's (1999;2003) skepticism about the usefulness of the entire concept of knowledge, I propose in this paper that a current clash between authoritative modern knowledge (including but not limited to "scientific" knowledge)and newly-prominent subversions of that authority