

CALL FOR PAPERS

Studying information deviances: “truth” and “conspiracy” in the digital age

DEADLINE FOR ABSTRACT SUBMISSIONS: SEPTEMBRE 10TH 2019

Special issue edited by Henri Boullier (IRIS, INSERM), Baptiste Kotras (LISIS, Université Paris-Est) and Ignacio Siles (CICOM, Université du Costa Rica).

Note to contributors

Proposals should take the form of 3,000 characters abstracts, space included (but references excluded). They can be written in English or in French, and should indicate precisely the **research question**, the **empirical methodology and data**, and a basic **theoretical framework**. They should insist on the scientific interest of the proposal, in relation to existing literature and the call for papers. They can include a short bibliography. Proposals must be sent before the deadline to the following four email addresses:

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Proposals will be anonymized, then reviewed and selected by the editorial board and the issue coordinators, in order to assess their scientific and thematic relevance. Authors of selected abstracts will then be invited to submit a full paper.

It has become common to state that the internet increases the circulation and reach of “conspiracy theories”. As shown by the many alarmist reports on “fake news” dissemination, or the recent moral panic triggered in France by IFOP’s study, “Investigating conspiracy theories” , questions about certification and circulation of online information seem to have reached a new and important kind of acuity. The massification of the internet, by reducing the role of traditional gatekeepers of the public space, and by allowing great numbers of users to publish online (Cardon, 2010), has indeed made more visible stories, positions or ideologies that until now had little or no access to the public sphere. Meanwhile, social and algorithmic dynamics of news hierarchization (Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2014) may have participated in the

production of “information bubbles”, i.e. ideologically homogeneous and relatively hermetic spaces, which tend to reinforce one’s beliefs rather than expose him to contradictory opinions.

However, this issue aims to go beyond these fairly consensual observations, by proposing both theoretical and empirical perspectives to understand the new tensions that currently arise about the social fabric of truth. Up to now, contributions on “conspiracy theories” have shown an obvious lack of empirical research. For the most part, they are openly normative (Bronner, 2011; Ho & Jin, 2011). They tend to put forward psychologizing and deterministic visions that explain the dissemination of these stories through subjective biases, and the “anonymity” allowed by social media (Tingley & Wagner, 2017).

Therefore, this call for papers primarily seeks to overcome some dead ends of current debates on the subject, first and foremost with the process of designating “conspiracy” and “conspiracy theories” . Denouncing the dangerousness of “chemtrails”, mandatory vaccination policies, governmental involvement in the 9-11 attacks, as well as industrial lobbying: all these different kinds of critique have been, at some point, designated as “conspiracy theories”. Consequently, it seems urgent to begin by questioning and deconstructing the concept of conspiracy theory itself: the variety of actors and ideologies to which it is applied shows in fact its weak heuristic potential for social sciences.

In fact, saying that something is a “conspiracy theory” has less to do with describing substantial content than with contradictory processes of moral disqualification, made by antagonistic actors engaged in controversies (Lemieux, 2007). As Luc Boltanski (2012) writes it, “no one ever claims to be the author of a conspiracy theory” (p. 279). In order to put aside the normative – and, in fact, pejorative – dimension of this term, we propose to study information deviances in a broad sense. By doing so, we wish to designate a very heterogeneous set of critiques and adhesions of varying intensities, which support and disseminate controversial political or scientific counter-narratives.

This call for papers seeks to avoid the temptation for social scientists to make a priori distinctions between “truth” and “conspiracy theories”, thus taking part – voluntarily or not – in the social processes of (dis)qualification that we precisely want to analyze as such. This detour invites us to investigate, with a minimum of preconceived notions, on highly conflictual objects, respecting a principle of symmetry in the analysis of narratives and their critiques. Following previous works by Goody (1979), Latour (2005) and Favret-Saada (1994), which aim to go beyond the simplistic dualism between rational and magical thought, we invite contributors to report on these alternative narratives, their material and cognitive support, their political content (Fine &

Rosnow, 1976), and their claim to the truth. It seems necessary to go beyond the apparent novelty of “conspiracy theories” by reintegrating them into the long and conflictual history of trust, and the institutions that produce it (Shapin, 2007). This way, we can analyze these unveiling postures of investigation, by giving accounts of their own logic, epistemology and intellectual filiations.

This issue welcomes investigations in social sciences that document narratives and critiques that may be designated as “conspiracy theories”. To this end, contributions may be made in one or several of the following areas.

Areas of research

1. Investigating spaces of conspiracist sociability

First of all, this issue aims at documenting how affinity-based collectives structure themselves around the discussion and dissemination of narratives sometimes designated as “conspiracy theories”. One objective will be to retrace – in a thorough way – the history of these groups and the narratives they promote. It will also be possible to analyze the ways in which these communities, and their debates, are organized: what are they talking about? According to which rules and argumentative devices? Using traditional or digital methods, the proposed contributions could also document trajectories of notoriety and dominant positions in these spaces (Cardon, Fouetillou, & Roth, 2014), or the boundaries of these communities and their possible relationships: do supporters of “flat Earth” communicate with ufologists? Does the criticism of vaccines overlap with that of pesticides? How porous or hermetic are these spaces? Finally, it may also be interesting to describe, from an ethnographic perspective, the modes of sociability and types of relationships that bind together the members of these communities. Drawing in particular on the extensive work on online communities (Jouët, 1989), contributions could for example study “pyramidology” or chemtrails specialists as subcultures, in which actors are involved, produce theories, mobilize resources which stabilize these narratives and the collectives behind them (Jenkins, 2013; Le Guern, 2009).

As for the entire issue, this axis of research aims at encouraging the submission of articles that combine online and offline investigations, in order not to reduce information deviances to their online occurrences. This issue particularly welcomes contributions that make it possible to portray so-called conspiracy theorists, in social, demographic and biographic terms. Does one believe in conspiracies at all ages, in all social environments? What do they believe in, with whom and when? In this context, it will be useful to consider the different degrees of endorsement to the counter-narratives under study,

and the reappropriations (including distanced or ironic ones) they inspire. It also seems necessary to include information deviances in a plurality of commitments (Lahire, 2008): what relationships, and separations, do people construct, between the deviant activity and other aspects of life, whether it be family, professional, friends, politics, etc.? Are information deviances mobilized as identity, individual or collective resources, or are they kept silent? In which social contexts are they accepted and affirmed to varying degrees? This type of contribution would make it possible to go beyond the cliché figure of the “complotist” (male, white, working class, isolated or even psychologically unstable).

2. Conspiracies, controversies and accusations

Saying that something is a conspiracy theory, as has been said, is not a mere description, but rather an accusatory category, through which groups of actors attempt to disqualify each other. Situations of controversy are therefore particularly appropriate moments to analyze the conditions under which the “conspirationism” label is assigned and circulated. In line with the now classical study of controversies (Lemieux, 2007), the aim here will be to examine how disputes involving accusations of conspirationism unfold. First of all, one may wonder under which conditions supporters of a (deviant) counter-narrative are designated as conspirators, and by whom? What are the resources and strategies mobilized by the actors when they try to assign this label, or to get rid of it? It may also be worth examining to what extent these resources and methods differ depending on the types of controversies involved: is the adversarial process the same whether one talks about terrorist attacks or Monsanto’s ability to keep RoundUp on the market?

On the one hand, this issue thus focuses on the actors involved in “fact-checking” or “debunking” narratives described as “conspiracy theories” (PolitiFact’s, “Truth-o-meter”, FactCheck.org, etc.), and on how they prioritize their subjects, and the tools, methods and support they mobilize. The battle against “fake news” can also be studied through the regulatory mechanisms set up by certain platforms (moderation, alerts, etc.). On the other hand, contributors to this special issue may also consider the critical work carried out by groups of actors described as conspiracy theorists. As a matter of fact, these counter-narratives often constitute attempts to subvert the media agenda in order to introduce new issues, new ways of seeing that are currently not represented (Gusfield, 1981; Neveu, 2015). One can therefore analyze, for example, the discourse on electro-sensitivity and the criticism of high-voltage lines, as a way of promoting the recognition of a pathology that is not included in official nomenclatures. Similarly, the anti-vaccine galaxy is defined by, among other things, the accusation of flaws in public health policies. What media strategies do these groups of rival actors adopt? What

are their relationships with mainstream media, and how critical and conflictual are they? How do they handle social media? Do they adapt, and how, their speeches according to the media supports on which they work? One may ultimately study how the internet affects the way these disputes unfold, and examine the methods used to bring about, or disqualify, "alternative public problems"?

3. Forms of profane knowledge and counter-narratives

The goal of this issue is to take complot narratives and their epistemologies seriously. We thus particularly welcome contributions that describe empirically the work of producing theories, their material support, and the forms of knowledge and argumentation apparatuses that they mobilize. An appropriate way to conduct research along this line could be to account for how consensus is built in the spaces where these theories are discussed. What forms of argumentation are deemed to be appropriate (or not)? How are different versions of a complot accepted or rejected? How is dissent managed? More generally, what are the procedures through which an "official version of the conspiracy" is maintained, at the expense of others, and thus endow these narratives with a certain solidity? To this end, content analyses can be conducted of videos on YouTube, blog posts, Facebook pages, online forums or even comment threads in order to seize the collective production of these counter-narratives in action. More generally, this axis invites applying to "complot theories" the same questions that are applied to the analysis of objectivity in the journalistic domain (Schudson, 2001) or in the scientific field (Daston & Galison, 2010). Research could be conducted that examines the tools and instruments mobilized to support counter-narratives: images, maps, diagrams, statistics, etc.

This hybridization between the grammar of objectivity and theories deemed heretical or complotist is currently discussed with intensity in the scientific field. For example, skeptics to climate change create counter-evaluations of scientific articles and data that show an increase in global temperatures; tobacco companies publish studies that have long weakened the consensus on the harmfulness of their products (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Proctor, 2012); promoters of Intelligent Design abandon the religious arguments of creationism, to favor a vocabulary and codes inspired by the classical grammar of objectivity. These actors thus engage in the construction of alternative forms of expertise, which sometimes are very sophisticated (data analysis, coding and statistical tools), while also multiplying the channels to distribute their counter-narratives (journals, blogs, social media). We therefore invite contributions that examine this issue, which is the strength of these marginalized narratives.

4. Sociotechnical supports of "conspiracy theories"

One last way of investigating so-called complot narratives is to question the sociotechnical conditions of their emergence and circulation, which builds on a media regime of “hyper reality” characterized by a “loss of certainty in one’s ability to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between reality and its mediated representation” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). In other words, how does the blurring of the social certification of truth interact with the social and technical structures that characterize the various spaces of the social Web? What sociotechnical features offer favorable conditions—or not—for the spread of so-called complot narratives in these spaces? This research axis seeks to evaluate how technical objects, such as algorithms, software platforms, communication devices or computer codes, enable the formation and circulation of this type of content.

From this point of view, articles could revisit the relationship between community and technology, a classic in the study of digital cultures (Proulx & Latzko-Toth, 2000). Why spaces like Reddit have become places for the proliferation of deviant narratives? What makes Facebook a support for accelerating the spread of complot narratives, controversies or accusations? Which algorithms tend to favor the visibility of certain theories at the expense of others (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018)? What role do these platforms play in the production of these contents, in their circulation, and in the construction of “facts” as robust and obvious (Wyatt, Harris, & Kelly, 2016)? Methodologically, online ethnography and discourse analysis could be privileged entry points into these issues. Digital methods associated with data science and the study of big data (network analysis, semantic analysis, etc.) could also be an ideal means to identify practices and patterns of information flow, otherwise not visible. Contributors could focus on case studies that center on a given platform or on a particular theory by following its manifestations throughout various spaces of the Web. A comparative approach is also welcomed to document the successes and failures of certain narratives and the communities that support them. What makes online controversies unique or special? How do media outlets react to these narratives or participate in their diffusion? This line of inquiry seeks to understand how deviant narratives evolve in the context of a large ecology of media and platforms.

Practical information

The abstracts (500 words maximum) are due by **September 10th 2019**. They should be sent to the following addresses:

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The abstracts will be reviewed anonymously by the issue coordinators and the members of the editorial board. Authors of submissions selected at this stage will be asked to e-mail their full papers by September 10th 2019.

Important dates

Deadline for abstract submission (500 words maximum, plus references):
09/10/2019

Responses to authors: **end of September**

Deadline for full papers (6 000 to 9 000 words, plus references): **11/30/2019**.

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