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SPECIAL ISSUE: TRUST, MEDIA, AND SCIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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with a preface by José van Dijck[a]

ABSTRACT

The first global pandemic of the information age has revealed how the coordinated spread of accurate information and the communication of relevant expert knowledge rely on functioning media channels, platforms, and institutions. As such, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed, and sometimes even catalyzed, longer-running societal processes through which traditional gatekeepers of scientific truth and expertise have been challenged or side-stepped, as alternative actors and institutions have taken the media stage and influenced policymaking spheres. To what extent has the changing media landscape contributed to (dis)trust in expertise? How do different political contexts shape the dynamics between science, policy, and diverse media publics? And in which ways does the contemporary spread of (mis/dis)information take shape? The articles in this collection address these questions by presenting original empirical analyses from a range of geographic and disciplinary vantage points.

Keywords: trust, science, social media, Covid-19 pandemic, disinformation, media landscape.

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PREFACE

José van Dijck

In 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, a Dutch government policy study[i] showed that a low base of trust – the mutual trust between citizens and between citizens and government – threatened social cohesion and compliance with corona measures. During the first eighteen months of the pandemic, trust in politics and government substantially declined; Dutch citizens' trust in government fell from nearly 70 percent in April 2020 to less than 30 percent in September 2021. An interesting detail of the study revealed that people for whom social media was their main source of information about the virus had less trust in government, health institutions, and mainstream (mass) media; they were also less likely to be vaccinated. Another study[ii] showed that the corona information Dutch people received from friends and family was trusted more (39%) than information coming from journalists at newspapers, radio, and TV (34%).

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare how conventional systems for communicating scientific knowledge have been transformed by new, alternative actors. In this context, social media networks play an important role in the declining trust of Dutch citizens in government and other institutions. Institutions such as science, politics, governments and mainstream media have long been the pillars of our trust in democratic governance – the ability to organize ourselves as a society. Digital platforms, especially social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram and TikTok, have become crucial links in public communication. Their impact on the distribution of information is significant as they have gained an increasingly central and centrifugal place in the communication flows between science, politics, government and policy, media and citizens. What was once considered a public square has turned into an online marketplace where anyone can start their own channel, instantly request information, and mobilize groups. Governments and institutions have played little role in the design of that online marketplace—a data-and-algorithm driven ecosystem in which voices are filtered through the automated commercial logic of attention (clicks) and ads.

Since 2016, there have been many discussions about the "subversive" power of these platforms. From disinformation and fake news on Facebook to polarization via YouTube's rabbit holes: through social media platforms, groups of users show a substantial decline in trust not only of the established media, but of all institutions. And even if science and scientists are still considered one of the most trusted of institutions and professional groups, we must understand how their societal role has shifted as part of a changing media landscape (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2021). This special issue takes on important questions in this regard. How do legacy media and social media reflect and contribute to a declining trust in expertise? Who were the main actors and what were the most important dynamics in processes of disinformation during the pandemic? And how has this communication dynamic

affected the status of our institutions, not just in Western Europe and the US, but in the Global South and beyond? The various geographic and disciplinary viewpoints explored in this Special Issue are important for future comparative studies concerning trust in expertise 'after' the pandemic.

The pandemic symbolized not just a moment of temporary crisis but likely epitomizes a protracted shift in the relationship between governments, independent institutions, and the public. Not just the type of actors changed but also their communication styles. For instance, mass media professionals traditionally relied on government spokespersons explaining and questioning official sources—professionals or experts—during the corona pandemic. However, governments also started to hire influencers to inform a wider public, which in some instances completely changed the tone and content of their message. Such influencers then became important new actors in public debate, following a social media logic where emotion, seduction, commerce, and opinion abound. In this dominant logic, content is more important than context, and gaining attention is more important than accurate information. The online circulation machine gives as much weight to laypeople with informed or uninformed opinions as it does to experts with institutional authority. Scientists and policymakers accustomed to a world of nuanced reasoning and proven hypotheses must suddenly manifest themselves in a world where opinions are more lucrative than facts, where assertions do better than arguments, and where clickbait triumphs over common ground and common sense.

But the affordances of social media platforms should not be seen simply as carriers of distrust or abolishers of trust in expertise. They have become crucial factors in allotting and defining validity and act as filters of online reality. At the same time, they are important societal stakeholders that have a huge interest in sustaining democratic pillars of trust. Therefore, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok should take their responsibility as new gatekeepers very seriously. The pandemic may have accelerated the need for governments to act—regulatory or otherwise—if only to avoid new 'infodemics' in the future. What is the responsibility of Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) vis-à-vis other forms of (legacy) media? Do they carry special responsibilities towards reigning in disinformation and hate speech, due to their size and scope?

Governments, in particular the European Union, have already started to take up these issues in drawing the Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act (DMA/DSA). This is a significant step towards a more responsible, fair, and democratic online landscape. However, regulation alone will never be enough to counter the still ongoing, decline in trust in institutions. Other questions arise, such as: do we need to create alternative online venues—perhaps smaller platforms catered towards niche audiences—that afford more trusted online environments? And on what public values should these platforms be based? There is a pressing need for decentralized, privacy-friendly social media platforms that are based on nonprofit, opensource principles and which share communal standards such as interoperability and dataportability. Technologies that facilitate the formation of

communities and support public organizations in designing their own trusted communication environments may not directly lead to more democracy, but they could be one step towards the construction of a more transparent and digital architecture.

Indeed, social media platforms are neither cause nor effect of declining trust in governments, media, and other institutions. But the online dynamic has penetrated the deepest capillaries of society and has a huge impact on public discourse. With the next stage of generative AI-powered technology already crossing our doorsteps—technology that will undoubtedly be integrated into existing social media tools—we need to face urgent societal and regulatory challenges with regards to trust in institutions. The articles in this Special Issue will help readers not only to look back on the pandemic as a single episode of crisis, but also anticipate the next stages of this important discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Donya Alinejad, Adriano José Habed, and Jaron Harambam

Some of the most heated public contestations of our time directly implicate scientific knowledge claims. As the global outbreak of the Sars-Cov-2 virus has demonstrated, public communication about, and trust in, such knowledge and its implications are as crucial for effective crisis management as the production of scientific knowledge, itself. The first global pandemic of the information age has revealed how the coordinated spread of accurate information and the communication of relevant expert knowledge rely on functioning media channels, platforms, and institutions. Institutionalized news journalism has long played an important role in generating public legitimacy for scientific knowledge in modern mass democracies (Franzen et al., 2011), and during the rise of public health concerns in the context of the pandemic, the public role of media came into sharp focus (Murdock, 2021). The coronavirus crisis also highlighted the operations of social media platforms at the interface between science and the public, fostering new spaces for intensified forms of public communication about scientific expertise on the matter. The private, commercial status of social media corporations, and their proclaimed agnosticism towards the truth value of the information they circulate, has led some to argue that a "platformisation of truth" is taking place, in which the truth-value of information is second to its commercial or political value (Cotter et al., 2022).

As such, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed, and sometimes even catalyzed, longer-running societal processes through which traditional gatekeepers of scientific truth and expertise have been challenged or side-stepped, as alternative actors and institutions have taken the media stage and influenced policymaking spheres (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). The pandemic has been a stress test for public communication of/about scientific knowledge, with lasting ripple-effects. In this special issue on trust, media, and science in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we focus on how political contestations against the background of shifting media logics are reshaping public engagement with scientific knowledge and expertise. To what extent has the changing media landscape contributed to (dis)trust in expertise? How do different political contexts shape the dynamics between science, policy, and diverse media publics? And in which ways does the contemporary spread of (mis/dis)information take shape? The articles in this collection address these questions by presenting original empirical analyses from a range of geographic and disciplinary vantage points.

The six articles are organized around three national/regional contexts of differing geographic scales: the Netherlands, Brazil, and North America. The divergences and overlaps that emerge within and across these three societal contexts in the same global health crisis offer important indications of how the socio-political particularities of each national setting, the societal standing of (medical) science, and media play into public engagement with relevant scientific expertise. Furthermore, the papers focus on multiple media (plat)forms, approached through a range of research methods, and analyze data traces, usage practices, and content on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, as well as relating social media phenomena to mass media events and their social meanings. Together, they build the Special Issue's intervention into the current discussion of what the Covid-19 pandemic can teach us about the role of contemporary media environments when it comes to how public trust in science is built and contested. In what follows, we outline three key conceptual debates or tensions that lie at the core of the discussions the papers in this Special Issue address. These pertain, respectively, to the concept of trust, the role of changing media affordances, and the relationship between scientific knowledge and mis-/disinformation.

1 TRUST

Media and communication scholarship has long been apt at discussing issues of public trust and distrust in media. Institutional analyses have highlighted how reduced funding for journalism, commercial logics overshadowing the public value of information, and platformization of the media landscape have fed a problematic decline in mass media's commitment to the public interest (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Such analyses compellingly described the media landscape upon which the current pandemic has been unfolding since 2020. However, the coronavirus crisis has since sparked renewed interest in a crisis of trust in media, and a related decline in trust in political leaders/institutions, thus ostensibly constituting "a global trust deficit disorder" (Flew, 2021). Such recent work has tended to focus on the important changes that media institutions are undergoing, but it has largely left out the issue of the public's trust in *scientific* institutions and the knowledge and expertise they produce. Trust in science can be seen as analytically distinct from trust in other societal sectors and institutions (such as journalism) that make their own kinds of claims to epistemic authority (Gauchat, 2011). Polls before the pandemic had found that, in the US, a fair amount of trust in scientists and science was prevalent (when compared to other institutional authorities).[iii] Moreover, a poll from December 2021 cited in the NYT found that trust in science and scientists increased globally during the pandemic.[iv] And survey data from 2022[v] shows that across a range of European countries, a high proportion of the public has positive feelings towards scientists working at universities. What does the apparent discrepancy between high levels of trust in science and a wider crisis of trust mean? Do we, indeed, have a generalized crisis of trust in institutionalized scientific

expertise on our hands? And what is particular about science and scientific institutions when it comes to public trust?

Through the contributions in this special issue, we address trust in (primary medical) scientific expertise as an object of study analytically distinct from trust in media, even as we address how the former is intertwined with the latter in light of an increasingly close relationship between media, policy, and science within "knowledge societies" (Weingart, 1999). While some have distinguished the nature of journalistic truth from the relationship that science has to truth (Michailidou and Trenz, 2021), discussions of "post-truth politics" often conflate the two. The analyses of trust that the papers present reflect the different ways in which the authors operationalize public trust in science. This helps to support and give flesh to the concept of trust that the special issue advances. Specifically, the different conceptualizations coalesce around a perspective that understands the ostensible public "trust deficit" as more complex than a problem with the public's lacking understanding of scientific knowledge (cf. Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Rather, the papers' empirical cases highlight specific media phenomena that expose the ways in which trust in scientific expertise is distinguishable from, but interwoven with, trust in, for instance, (micro)celebrities and other public personas, how it is mobilized through emotional appeals, and how it relies on narrative representations of scientific knowledge. Notably, these features of trust are discussed as being intertwined with – and not necessarily opposed to – the rational, deliberative features that media publics also engage in.

Such bases for authorizing and contesting scientific knowledge appear to fit well with what has been identified as a cultural "obsession with authenticity," an idea that helps us understand how immediacy or a (claimed) lack of mediation can produce trust in an era of ubiquitous mediation (Enli, 2016). This has been particularly apparent in political communication, where populist leaders have made claims to a more immediate relationship with their constituencies (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018), but it has also been described as an important feature of influencer media culture (Cunningham and Craig, 2018). The way trust is increasingly socially configured through social media formats' perceived immediacy of communication has important implications for science, too. According to this idea, trust becomes organized more around the people we know, for instance, with the rise of "social trust" in news that is consumed via social networks (Flew, 2021). This development has been suggested to signal a shift away from generalized trust or trust in institutions. Yet, we see a simultaneous intermeshing of social media network logics with more established institutional media, as a considerable share of science communication by scholars, universities, and research institutes, comes to be performed via social media (Weingart and Guenther, 2016), and as social media platforms seek to gain public trust by working with public institutions.

By closely examining the workings of public trust and mis-/distrust in pandemic science within different publics, the papers in this issue expose the key social and political forces that mediate public trust in science. The authors examine various phenomena involving public scrutiny and distrust of scientific expertise, furthering our understanding of the range of social forces contemporary scientific experts must contend with when seeking/gaining the public's trust in their epistemic authority. For example, looking at the film, *Plandemic,* which was widely circulated on YouTube in the pandemic's early stages, Tarun Kattumana's article examines the main devices that this documentary style production uses in its aim of garnering trust among its audience; it seeks to convince them, in turn, to distrust scientific and state bodies. The paper shows how appeals to scientific credentials and emotion, far from being presented in opposition to one another, operate in tandem through the film's attempts to gain trust within a primarily social media-based, international public. Sharing a focus on YouTube but analyzing the rise of a popular Brazilian science communicator, Carlos d'Andréa and Verônica Costa's article shows how trust in (medical) science is inextricably linked to the social media skills of communicators. Within the contemporary media landscape, these skills can be seen as forms of expertise that become increasingly relevant for building public trust in scientific knowledge.

2 CHANGING MEDIA AFFORDANCES

Early hopes for the emancipatory potentials of The Social Web and the rise of social media platforms have tended to reproduce some of the utopian narratives about the early internet, itself. One of the main potentials receiving attention has been the communicative affordances of platform media technologies for public discourse and relatively boundless participation. Yet, critiques of celebratory notions of participatory media culture have consistently pointed out the shortcomings of a focus on participation as a panacea for more democratic decision-making. Media scholars have long critiqued the celebration of online participation that masks the underlying profit motives of platforms (Deuze, 2008, Schäfer, 2011). Such parameters in the political economy of platforms contribute to the commodification of information on social media (Marres, 2018), substituting the formal qualities of information within platform economies (e.g., virality and shareability) for its truth value. In recent years, including in the context of the pandemic, we have also seen how the very same media affordances that (are claimed to) foster participation, inclusion, and healthy political dissidence have been mobilized towards the spread of conspiracy theories, manipulative communication strategies, and political ideologies interested in exploiting the flaws in liberal democratic systems (Bennet & Livingston, 2018).

Indeed, in liberal democracies, illiberal democracies, and autocratic regimes alike, digital counter-publics as a source of politically progressive participation have made

way for the power of reactionary "counter-publics" that have the same potentials for entering and influencing mass media spheres through the affordances of digital platform media (Kaiser and Puschmann, 2017). The relationship between counter-publics and "mainstream" mass media spheres is consistently at stake in the papers of this special issue. The different media-institutional contexts and histories in each of the national settings discussed in the papers reveal how the different meanings of the political and media mainstream in each country shape the ways digital counter-publics position themselves. For example, Nina Santos' paper demonstrates how the rapidly growing ecosystem of alternative media sources that Bolsonaro's supporters link to within their Twitter networks position themselves in clear opposition to mainstream Brazilian media. Santos reminds us that, critical counter-publics opposing the mainstream media have historically been left-wing, especially with "the struggle for press freedom during the military dictatorship (1964-1985)" (Santos, this issue). But she shows that with more recent shifts in the Brazilian political terrain – including a right-wing presidency – it is the government's left-wing opponents who refer most to traditional mainstream media sources on Twitter. On the other hand, Jaron Harambam's paper, situated in the Dutch context, discusses the media practices of users who would be labelled as conspiracy theorists by those outside their media counter-publics. This counter-public's relationship to national mainstream media public emerges as a strong influence on the former's articulations of distrust in scientific bodies. In contrast to Santos' account of the polarization between the government and mainstream media, Harambam shows how his respondents' suspicions are aroused, precisely, by the close alignment between the narratives presented by mainstream media, political figures, and scientists in the Netherlands' coordinated national pandemic response.

The pandemic has paradoxically highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of how the increasingly close relationship between media, policy-making, and science operates (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). It has also given rise to new frames, narratives, and terms - such as "the Infodemic" - for publicly articulating the dark sides of the role of media and its relationship to science and the spread of scientific knowledge. Yet the merging of media and scientific expertise did not start with the pandemic. The notion of the "mediatization" (or "medialization") of science (see Weingart, 2022) has long been influential in emphasizing the mutual dependence between media and science. This dependence is necessary for generating public legitimacy for science by making the knowledge it produces available for public understanding and deliberation. In the media landscape of the platform society, "scientists are able to communicate directly with an audience, bypassing the gatekeeping of journalism" (Bucher, 2020). This development opens up a whole array of new interaction possibilities between experts and citizens. But what does the breakdown of mass media's role in (re)presenting scientific knowledge, and the possibility for scientists (and non-scientists) to access and produce their own networked publics online, mean for science communication and the status of

scientific expertise (Roedema et al., 2022)? The papers in this issue demonstrate how the (counter-)publics that form around alternative expertise and/or lay ideas compete in the changing media landscape, vying for legitimacy in emerging ways. In particular, platform-specific media cultures and technological affordances that generate their own formal and aesthetic features shape the ways information is spread via social ties, how expertise is defined and contested, and how scientific knowledge is represented and accepted as epistemically authoritative for/by media audiences.

3 SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE & ONLINE DISINFORMATION

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it has increasingly come to light that the platforms that long eschewed taking a stance on the content of the information they are used to spread are becoming more invested in the truth-claims their users are making. Fact-checking initiatives, policies on flagging fake news and disinformation, and tweaking of the algorithmic rankings of certain content fly in the face of claims about platforms as neutral or disinterested mediators of information. They also suggest a trend in platform governance towards platforms' increasing intervention when it comes to drawing a line between what counts as information and mis-/disinformation. As Terry Flew puts it, "the days of being merely the conduits for messages sent by others, ranked by popularity unbounded by truth-claims, have passed, and a more activist role is asserted" (2021). However, in practice, decisions about information governance that approach certain claims as out-of-bounds is often not decided on epistemic grounds, alone. Such interventions typically take place when public outcries, political motives, and/or commercial interests concentrated around high-profile issues exact pressure on platforms and other powers to respond by making/brokering compromises with/between powerful parties (Gillespie, 2018). Moreover, few of these platform content moderation practices take place in transparent ways, nor do they offer forms of accountability as to what is being removed and following which criteria (Harambam, 2021). While some measures give precedence to addressing societal harms over elite interests, these matters raise questions about the implications of prioritizing any societal values over epistemic bases for information governance. Can addressing social harms offer sufficient justification for curbing more open media participation, and can such interventions have the desired effect of increasing warranted trust in scientific knowledge?

The nature of scientific knowledge production means that it is reliant not only on evidence, agreed-upon facts, and articulating consensus claims but also on ongoing debate, reasoned disagreement, and competing interpretations between experts. The inherently open-ended character of scientific enterprise as an unfinished project of truth-seeking contains within it uncertainty, tentative-ness, and

partiality. As such, it is not always immediately self-evident on which basis science disinformation ought to be distinguished from dissenting scientific views (Harambam, 2020). While encouraging dissent is important for science, facilitating public contestations of expert knowledge raises challenges of its own (Feinstein, 2015). This is especially the case in today's platform-oriented media landscape, which prioritizes controversy and popularity over expertise and the truth value of information (Alinejad & Van Dijck, 2023). How can experts' knowledge be critiqued by those without expertise, themselves? And can we discern between dissent that is critique and that which manifests as a form of excessive or misplaced distrust in science and produces an obstructionist stance without a competing epistemic claim? Such challenges raise an important tension between interventions to curb mis-/disinformation, on the one hand, and the nature of scientific knowledge and its processes of production, on the other (Marres, 2018). This tension compounds the challenges that already exist around approaches to disinformation in today's media landscape, including the problem with the dominant definition of disinformation (as distinct from misinformation) as being inaccurate information that is spread with the intention to deceive. The provenance of information circulating online is notoriously difficult to pin down, often making it too difficult to estimate the original intentions with which it was produced and spread (Treen et al., 2020).

Some scholars argue that it is incredibly difficult to distinguish problematic public science dissent from that which constitutes healthy disagreement; so much so that we should avoid trying (de Melo Martin and Intemann, 2018). Others suggest that while some degree of politically framing science and science-informed policy is necessary for public sense-making and disagreement, the politicization of science can sometimes become excessive, coming to stand in the way of deliberative dissent (Pielke, 2007; Rekker, 2021). As the papers in this issue reflect, the politicization of scientific knowledge is done by democratic and less democratic state authorities, alike, as well as a range of media participants, including experts and non-experts, both those who are trusting and distrusting dissenters. This collection of papers does not reveal a straightforward answer to questions about which approach to take to defining, understanding, and responding to different forms of epistemically unfounded information circulating in complex contemporary media spheres. But, through the contexts these papers detail and analyze, they effectively highlight what the significance and the stakes are of the presence/absence of agreement about basic facts.

For instance, in their article, Brianna Wiens and Shana MacDonald show how the use of various social media platforms by "Public Health Influencers" (this issue) in the Canadian context presents a relatively successful mode of curbing the spread of disinformation through a reorientating of platform-based communications towards evidence-based facts. The paper takes an approach that problematizes the political

polarization that is responsible for a lack of agreement about such basic facts. This approach allows the authors to trace local, context-specific media practices that actively seek to counter disinformation not only in the interest of public trust in medical expertise, but also in the interest of those "who have been disproportionately affected by both disinformation and the pandemic" (Wiens and MacDonald, this issue). On the other hand, like multiple authors in this Special issue, Robert Prettner and his coauthors prefer an approach that does not make any determination of the truth value of the media content they analyze. Nevertheless, they come to a similar conclusion as Wiens and MacDonald about the social processes through which mediated trust is built in expertise. Specifically, they stress the importance of authorities using dialogical communication with the public in order to demonstrate compassion for their complex concerns and help make explicit the more implicit moral valuations publics are working with.

4 FEATURED IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

We open the Special Issue with Carlos d'Andréa and Verônica Costa's "One Biologist, One Million Deaths: Expertise between Science, Social Media, And Politics during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil." The article zooms in on the figure of science communicator Atila Iamarino, whose YouTube channel gained sudden popularity at the onset of the Coronavirus crisis in a highly polarized political context. During the heydays of the pandemic, Brazil was in fact the setting of intense conflicts between people holding denialist, conspiracist, and populist stances – in line with President Jair Bolsonaro's weltanschauung – and people committed to scientific evidence and procedures. As a science communicator, Atila belongs to the latter group. Through a thorough analysis of his increasing visibility and public presence during the pandemic, both online (on YouTube and Twitter) and offline (in TV programmes, newspapers, and transnational bodies), d'Andréa and Costa show that Atila managed to navigate different media environments and multi-layered areas of expertise. In particular, they argue that Atila successfully confronted the attacks by anti-science movements and pro-Bolsonaro users by embodying a specific condition – that of the "science influencer" – located at the crossroads of epistemic institutions and digital platforms.

Nina Santos' contribution, "Networked Information Pro and Contra Bolsonaro's discourse on Coronavirus," analyses the respective information sources that the supporters and detractors of President Jair Bolsonaro share on Twitter. Internationally, Brazil's leadership had one of the most high-profile science denialist policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic. Tracing the immediate tweet responses to the divisive President's momentous speech about the virus, Santos shows that certain information sources were responsible for creating coherent alternative narratives about Covid-19. She argues that information sources shared on social media must therefore be understood as important "mediators" of

the discursive realities through which people made sense of the pandemic. In a platform environment where information sources are authorized through network dynamics rather than hierarchies of relevant expertise, the analysis demonstrates how alternative media sources vastly overshadow traditional media reporting within anti-science networks, raising important questions about the consequences of epistemic authority being negotiated in a networked way.

Brianna Wiens and Shana MacDonald show in their insightful article "Meme-ifying Data: The Rise of Public Health Influencers on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter during Covid-19" how the affordances and logics of social media can also be deployed to garner trust in public institutions and fight disinformation instead. They analyze the social media communication practices of three key *Public Health Influencers* (PHI's) during the pediatric vaccination campaigns of late 2021 in their local context, Ontario, Canada, and argue that their memetic tactics enable them to engage the public in ways traditional science communication cannot: by directly interacting with citizens and their concerns and by showing affect and sympathy. Driven by a larger impulse to combat health inequities that are exacerbated by the different forms of disinformation circulating on social media, these PHI's make use of several memetic bricolage techniques coupled with affective 'micro-celebrity' practices in order to build trustworthy relationships with their audiences to advance stalled public conversations and to reorient the spread of disinformation back to evidence-based facts. Their article shows how the concerted social media efforts against disinformation by these PHIs contributes to advocacy for more accessible, just, and equitable health care for Ontarians. And it adds a much-needed nuance to our negative understanding of the role of social media in contemporary discussion about health disinformation.

Tarun Kattumana's "Alternative Credibility, Empathy, and the Plandemic: Trust in Conspiracy Theories during the Covid-19 Pandemic" conducts a philosophically inflected analysis of *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda behind COVID-19*. The video, which went viral in Spring 2020 among right-leaning Americans in particular, consists in a long interview to an alleged "revolutionary scientist," Judy Mikovits, who dares speak against the risks of wearing masks, the interests behind pharmaceutical companies and the state, the dangers of vaccines, and the like. Without dismissing those who are persuaded by the *Plandemic* as paranoid, Kattumana scrutinizes the video and points out a few devices it mobilizes to build trust. Concretely, the article focuses on people's distrust toward public institutions and, especially, on the construction of an "alternative credibility" by micro-celebrities such as Mikovits, who give their audiences an impression of authenticity and relatability. Both traits are conveyed through a (mediated) form of empathy as well as a strategic storytelling that promotes intimacy while conveniently crafting the narrative in such a way that Mikovits herself appears to be the victim of public health officials and institutions. By dissecting the sentiments that were mobilized

in the early stages of the Coronavirus pandemic, Kattumana warns us about how these same sentiments can be mobilized in the future, should there be another critical moment in which trust and science are at stake.

In his article, "Distrusting Consensus: How a Uniform Corona Pandemic Narrative Fostered Suspicion and Conspiracy Theories," Jaron Harambam examines how distrust emerged among certain groups in response to the Dutch national pandemic response. By seeking out an ethnographic understanding of the perspectives of those who would typically be categorized as conspiracy theorists, Harambam uncovers a consistent rationale behind their media production and consumption, namely: too much consensus among official bodies breeds distrust. A lack of heterodox scientific perspectives within the public discussion, together with an alarming media narrative about pandemic, and a limited set of key policy options are argued to have created the conditions for people to turn away from institutionally authorized accounts and towards a search for more complexity and alternative voices. In discussing the implications of his conclusions, Harambam offers the insight that suspicion among parts of the public can potentially be mitigated by avoiding the oversimplification of the complexities inherent to the communication and application of relevant scientific knowledge in the respective realms of media and policy.

Robert Prettner, Hedwig te Molder, Maarten Hajer, and Rens Vliegenthart close off this Special Issue with their article "Light at the End of the Tunnel? The Staging of Expertise During the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign." Using data from official press conferences, Twitter responses of the public and political motions put forward by Members of Parliament, this group of Dutch scholars compares the governmental, public, and parliamentary framings of expertise in The Netherlands during the first Covid-19 vaccination campaign between January 1st and April 30th, 2021. To analyse their empirical material, they combine an interactional framing approach with a discursive psychology perspective to better understand how framings between stages modify, contest, or build upon each other. They argue that the press conferences show a persistent technocratic framing as science and policy is univocally connected. Political leaders unproblematically convey the message that there is light at the end of the tunnel, if only citizens will get vaccinated, fusing scientific predictions with political desirability. Once the AstraZeneca vaccine comes under fire, however, they point to scientific experts are again, who are then held accountable for the policy changes. This technocratic framing is disputed on Twitter and in Parliament, albeit in different ways, by making hidden moralities relevant, such as the government's assumed complacency, rigidity, and inability to explain policies with the available evidence. Their paper shows the contested and complex relations political leaders have with science.

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ENDNOTES

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