

‘Why can’t we just ask a question?’ How to understand and resolve public disputes about scientific expertise in the context of grand social challenges

Scientific expertise can be bitterly contested nowadays, especially when governments deal with major social problems, such as COVID-19, vaccination against childhood diseases and climate change. However different anti-vax movements and supporters of ‘Virus truth’ may seem, they also share concerns, given they meet in protests against corona-resisting measures. This project investigates whether the waning authority of governmental and public knowledge institutes is such a common denominator, and if so, what exactly gives substance to these public discontents. We go beyond the knowledge-deficit-model and examine how expertise is built, accepted and contested in real-life-interaction. Building robust truths in modern society requires a fundamental shift from a Let-me-explain-it-once-more-repertoire or debate mode, to a dialogue in which the interplay between morality and science can be openly examined and discussed.

Using conversation analysis and dramaturgical ethnography, and in close collaboration with our transdisciplinary consortium, two PhDs study transmedia and face-to-face debates, in order to uncover both productive (effectively mediating passion) and unproductive (arousing mere rage) practices that currently drive fact-value relationships. Three domains in which truths are vehemently contested – vaccination (including COVID-19-immunisation), the nitrogen debate and climate change scepticism - form the starting-point for this research. On the basis of these insights, and experimental research that systematically assesses the effects of different types of conversational repertoires on citizens’ attitudes and emotions, two postdocs develop a theoretical and practical basis for new institutional arrangements that support the articulation of hidden moralities and open them up for dialogue and action. The project thus provides (a) insight into what moralities experts and publics actually contest when they dispute each other’s claims to knowledge and authority; (b) the co-creation and testing of a new language and modes of engagement in workshops and training-modules, to secure resilient forms of expertise in situations of epistemic uncertainty and deep political divides.