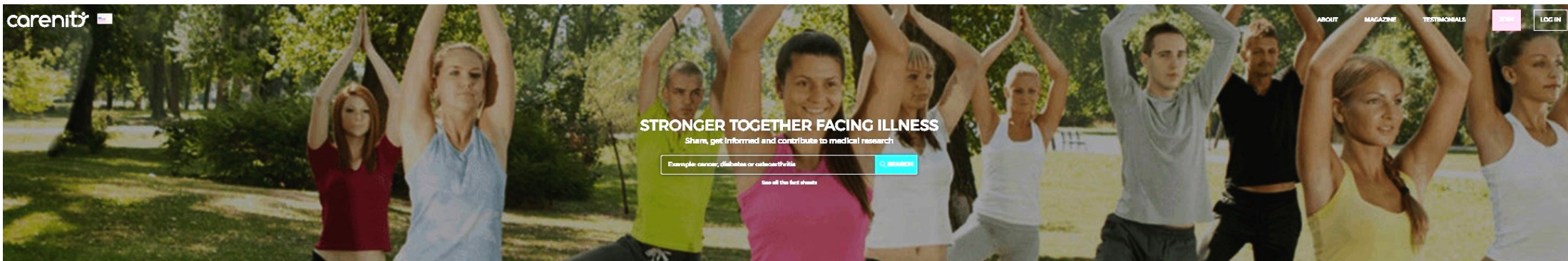


# Post-truth or pre-truths? Lay people facing face masks

Madeleine Akrich et Franck Cochoy

4S Conference, Session 46, *Corona Truth Wars*  
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**“Who is right, who is wrong?  
Time will tell!!!”**

Valou66 @SAW1967, 06/10/2020

- Carenity: A forum specialized in health issues
- A topic on sanitary masks (July 2020-January 2021); about 900 posts
- Pre-truth instead of post-truth:
  - The Covid crisis as a situation of uncertainty
  - Knowledge = an objective rather than a starting point

- Despite conspiracists intervention, the discussions on the forum offer multiple perspectives and questions that pave the way for new knowledge production (pre-truth)

Structure:

- I) how the discussion works;
- II) how it convokes varied ontologies and thus prepares the advancement of knowledge

# Blathering, deliberating, defibrillating

- At first glance, very messy exchanges
- Burst-like flows
  - 25% of posts follow a message sent less than 13 minutes ago
- Three modes of exchange:
  - blathering
  - deliberating
  - defibrillating

# Blathering (i.e. foolish talk)

- Trolling-like interventions, non-directed short messages; advertising fake news, conspiracist theories, and the like.

From Bowieziggye: "Hello, I am appalled at the docility of people, wearing the mask IS UNNECESSARY IN THE OUTDOOR!!! (...) READ, LEARN, do not behave like sheep who rush without thinking! Especially look for the purpose of this whole charade; the bigger the better. Have a good day." [29.12.2020]

- How can such a forum function and help learning something about the mask?

# Deliberating

- 61% of the posts are targeted: this indicates a willingness to discuss;
- Provocative messages... provoke reactions:

From boussafsafb to all: “The mask is useless. The virus is too small. 125 nano-microns. Hi!” [02/08/2020, 08:13]

From maritima to boussafsafb: “ the virus is transmitted in droplets (aerosols) of different sizes. So... mentioning the size of the virus is an element but not conclusive enough. ”. [02/08/2020, 08:38]

→ A wiki-like process (horizontal and distributed fact-checking).

This said:

- 1) less a move towards consensus than a dialogue of the death
- 2) the contamination of ideas on the Internet is less obvious than what people think
- 3) No relativist discussion behind closed door: several external hard references and data are injected into the conversation

# Defibrillating: resetting the discussion.

- 1) **ignoring debatable points:** response delay more than twice longer for conspiracists
- 2) **Reorienting an impossible general conversation towards practical and technical matters:** “for or against the mask” becomes:” “what mask?”/ “how can we cope with it”
- 3) **Considering persons beyond the arguments:**

- Suliac: "**Wearing a mask is an aberration... When will you stop being manipulated** by ignorant, incapable or worse...?" [02.11.2020, 17 :26]
- UD6: “Don't you wear it @suliac? Or do you come here just to make the buzz?”
- UD6: I am still waiting for your suggestions. (...) **Share your knowledge and actions.**
- [Suliac disappears. Then two days later, he comes back and says he is tired because of a surgery].
- UD6: “Alas, I am afraid that you do not have better solutions to give us, of course, **you are fully forgiven**, on a moment of anger we can write anything, without, after, with hindsight, know how to do better, I confess to you, that for the moment personally, I do not see solutions”

Revealing people's weaknesses → moderation ;

Personal experiences = a reference for mask discussions

# The forum, a machine for proliferating ontologies

## USE ISSUES: BEHAVIORAL SOCIOLOGY

“Anyway, we do what we can with these masks. We take them down, we put them back on our noses, we adjust them, in short we fiddle with them a lot. So I doubt that they are very effective...”

## SOCIAL INTERACTIONS: SOCIOLOGY

“ Yesterday I went to the hairdresser... the mask practically silenced us... ”

## COMFORT ISSUES: ERGONOMICS / DERMATOLOGY / PNEUMOLOGY

“It gives me a rash, which takes a long time to go away”.

## TECHNICAL ISSUES / ENGINEERING

“They have been saying for a few days now that cloth masks are not effective. So in that case WHY did I receive a dozen in the mail yesterday ????”

## MASK AS A BUSINESS : ECONOMY

## REASSURANCE DEVICE : PSYCHOLOGY

## CONTROL DEVICE : POLITICAL SCIENCE

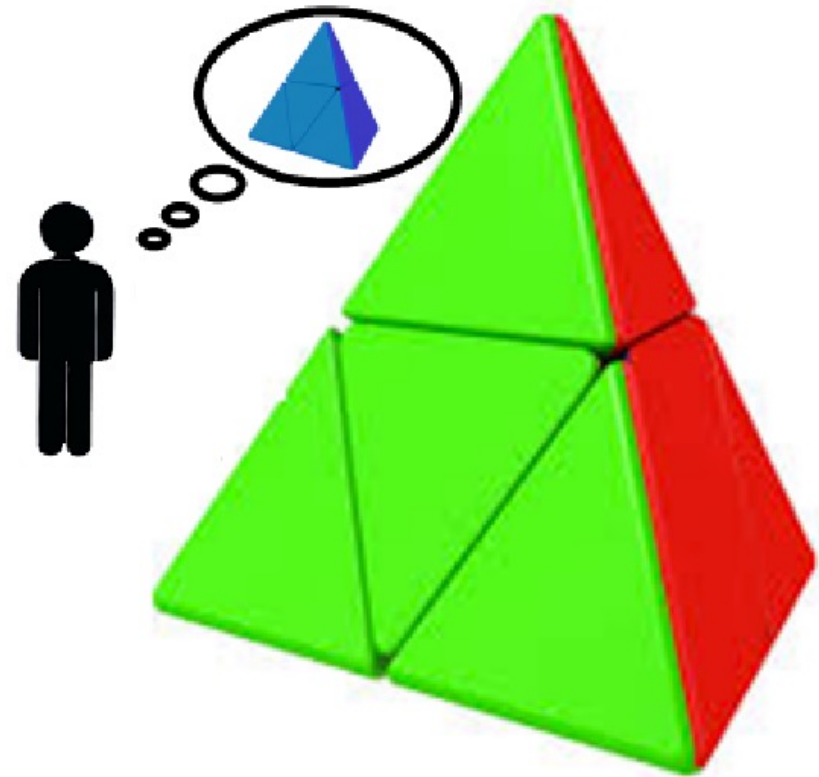
## PROTECTION FOR OTHERS : PHILOSOPHY/ ETHICS

- Talking about masks, even with erroneous arguments, summons and produces knowledge.
- The forum: an epistemic dialogical space in which the presence of conspiracy theories plays a driving role

“ Social conflict and ideological considerations may be seen as an important element in the development of bodies of knowledge rather than as feature of the environment that retards such development. ” *Shapin 1979*

“If an individual is placed in front of each of the four faces of a pyramid painted in different colors, each individual will attribute to the pyramid the color of the face in front of which they are placed. Only if they are allowed to walk around the pyramid will they discover their error” (Bronner, 2017).

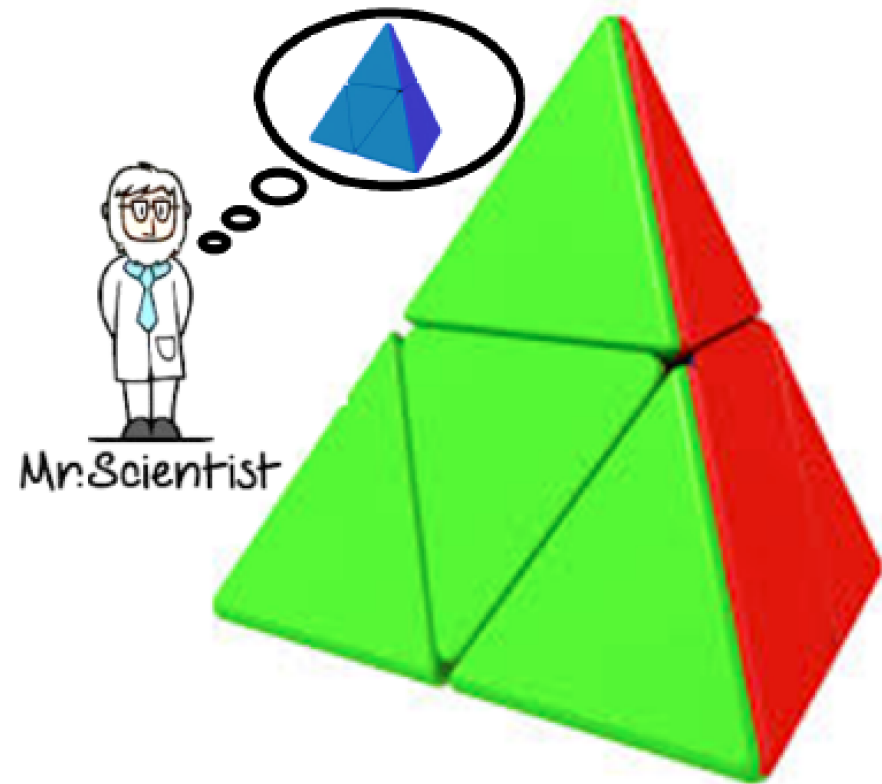
- With the forum, the metaphor is put upside-down:
- ... on the forum, the people who face the multi-colored pyramid are not credulous laypersons who ignore the scientific truth;
- ... it is the scientists who face the pyramid faces and discover all its colors thanks to the laypersons' discussion.





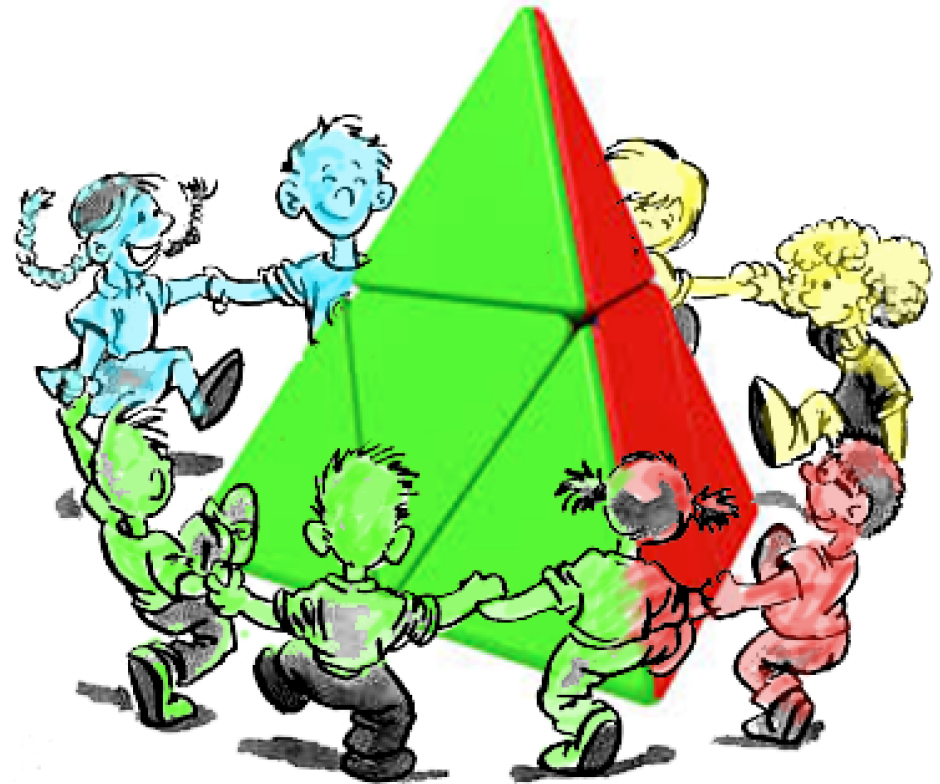
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## Under the mask

- Conspiracists and non conspiracists positions are rooted in individual experiences; they help reducing cognitive dissonance:

Myria36 suffers from overweight and respiratory failure; she cannot bear the mask, and thus adopts conspiracy theories:

“From mirya36 to all : (...) Personally I never wear it [the mask] (...). I have tried, but I get sick every time” (...)

“All the figures they come up with are a big lie and they prefer to instill fear to better enslave us”

Whatever the position, we discover another type of truth: the truth (and drama) of personal conditions

Consequently, what matters is not a remote debate on masks, but the adjustment of masks to individual situations

# Conclusion

- Does the debate on masks hide science like it hides people's faces?
- Of course, the pandemic favors conspiracy theories.
- However, analyzing the Carenity forum shows that all arguments are not equal; vigilant participants quickly intervene to counter debatable positions and refer them to external facts and sources
- Paradoxically, even conspiracy theories are useful: they help review all the sciences involved in mask use, and thus abandon the wrong idea of a singular and unique "science".
- In "post-truth", the preposition as well as the noun are problematic:
- Pre-truth, rather than "post" / multiple truths, rather than a single one

- LEFTOVER / A machine for the proliferation of authorities
- Does the forum challenge science by equating it with doubtful information?
- 1) The technical infrastructure of the forum favors just a click away information (vs. paid/copyright protected press and scientific knowledge); conspiracists like videos more / non conspiracists quote institutional information sites
- 2) conspiracists' references appear in messages addressed to anyone (71% of the cases); non conspiracists' sources target conspiracists
- People outline that scientists are many and often disagree
- Conspiracists quote "famous names" made by Youtube, alt-right movements, and so on;
- However, no clear divide between social media and conspiracy theory: the forum participants review the literature; conspiracy theorists quote scientific sources, and so on: science is more a target than a stable source