

**Call for paper proposals:
Scientific Disinformation: A Transnational Public Problem**

*February 28 - Mars 1, 2024, in Quebec, Canada
Organized by the Bell Chair of Science Journalism at Université Laval*

In recent years, the public and frontal rejection of scientific claims and the dissemination of misleading or outright false content, often claiming to have a basis in scientific methods and practices (Panizza et al., 2022), have become a central issue in public debate in several countries. Scientific issues such as vaccines, the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, and artificial intelligence are areas where scientific disinformation, considered to be an element of disruption in the circulation of scientific content to a wider public (Oliveira, 2020), is denounced with particular zeal. This denunciation is based on a strong mobilization of many actors from the scientific, political, and journalistic worlds in several countries, and appears as a transnational public problem.

Without ruling out the hypothesis that scientific disinformation may be the product of one form or another of networking by the carriers of this content, including on a transnational scale (Bajwa, 2021; EU, 2022; Hameleers, 2020; Pereira and Paz García, 2021; Treen et al., 2020), this call for proposals focuses particularly on the mobilization of *enunciators* of the content, and on the transnational character of the emergence of scientific disinformation. We wish to draw attention to the socially constructed nature of social problems (Best, 2010, Gusfield, 1989, Hassenteufel, 2010; Neveu, 2005), and to the fact that they do not emerge naturally in societies but are instead the result of promotional work done by a set of claim-makers, including in this case transnational actors, interested in making situations they consider “problematic” visible on public agendas (media agendas, political agendas and governmental agendas). Thus, the emergence of a problem fundamentally depends on the resources mobilized by these actors to make it into a public debate.

We propose to examine the problem of scientific disinformation as a product of the action and deployment of the promoters of public debate on this subject. This angle should not only make this problem more intelligible and transparent but could also offer a better grasp on the phenomenon itself of content which is qualified as “disinformation”. All the more so since this “problem” has become a fundamentally collective issue, an object of interest for journalists, scientists and science communicators, intellectuals, activists, social movements, international organizations, policymakers, groups of science enthusiasts, museums, educational and extracurricular institutions, etc. Ultimately, the disseminators of disinformation and the audiences targeted by such content also contribute to the construction of this problem (Aruguete and Calvo, 2020; Moreira et al., 2021). The visibility of the problem is also developed at the transnational level: scientific disinformation is frequently denounced within scientific networks or by international organizations, such as WHO, OPAS, Unesco, etc.

Journalists assume an important dual role in the social construction of the problem of disinformation. As producers of information relating to science, they arbitrate the definition of

what is scientific and what is not and thus become potential definers, promoters, denouncers or censors of non-science. Moreover, as gatekeepers of the public media space, they ensure access to it of specific “causes” and specific claim-makers as “sources” of information.

Thus, in both of these two roles, science journalists can become advocates against the “problem” of scientific disinformation and join forces with different “sources” carrying this same denunciation. The act of publicly denouncing, fighting, and proposing solutions to manage the circulation of unverified scientific content is rooted in the ethical tradition of journalists as a group and, more particularly, in this group’s invocation of objectivity and the public interest (Deuze, 2005). Moreover, it extends the historical action of journalists against the production and circulation (nowadays generally on social media) of “unverified” content by actors located outside the world of information, and reaffirms journalism as a producer of “reliable,” “verified” narratives on society and science.

Public interventions on disinformation are therefore the most visible aspect of operations of identification, framing, and agenda setting of this issue. They reveal alliances, tensions, and conflicts between the different claim-makers that are involved. In this sense, understanding the practices of promotion of a public problem highlights the diversity of actors involved in an issue presented as scientific in nature, thus “repopulating” this world (Pereira et al., 2018) by shedding light on the work that precedes its visibility. In other words, public discourses on disinformation reveal traces of the modalities of appropriation, negotiation, and promotion of this issue by different claim-makers. Beyond conceptual debates, the very way of naming this situation (scientific disinformation, misinformation/disinformation, infodemic, fake news, fake sciences, scientific negationism) says something about the ideologies, motivations, and commitments of the involved actors. Similarly, there are variations in the attribution of responsibility for the problem of scientific disinformation (Cf. Harsin, 2018; Gehl and Lawson, 2022). Is this a result of the use of social-digital networks? Or is it related to the quality of scientific communication, to the relationship of scientists to society? Is it the result of a lack of scientific literacy, and therefore of media and science education policies – of their weakness, of their absence? In the same way, the various proposals to combat scientific disinformation, to find solutions to this problem (for example: investment in scientific literacy and media education, fact-checking, regulation or accountability of platforms, criminalization of disseminators of “false information”) refer to the practices of claim-makers, as well as to the historical and territorial grounding of the problem (Cf. Cook et al., 2017; Hanson, 2017).

In short, working on the construction of the problem of scientific disinformation allows us to understand the emergence and visibility of this issue on the public agenda and to reveal the system of conventions of science journalism, seen as a mediator of debates and as a space for discussion where various claim-makers converge, including journalists. This international colloquium “Scientific Disinformation: A Transnational Public Problem” thus seeks to interrogate this problem by focusing on the role of science journalism in structuring this debate on a transnational scale.

The papers proposed for this Colloquium can therefore relate to the following four **axis**:

1. *The media representation of the problem of scientific disinformation.* What are the framings of its coverage? What sources are prioritized? In short, how does the coverage of this problem reveal the practices, the ways of doing things, and the professional culture of journalists specialized or not in science? The works submitted that relate to this axis must be interested in the public *metadiscourses* on scientific disinformation, seen as means to understand the practices of science journalism and the role of mediator assumed by journalists and the media in this debate.

2. *The participation of journalists as claim-makers.* This axis deals with the commitments of journalists as interested actors, either as enunciators of the problem or by proposing solutions to the problem. It is therefore about the role of science journalists as members of a community and as a professional group. What are the practices, the strategies mobilized by these journalists to make their points of view on this problem visible (for example: the publication of columns, editorials, interventions on social media, etc.)? What advocacy practices do these journalists use with scientists, policymakers, and legal bodies to intervene in the debate or to find solutions to this problem? How do they seek to strengthen their identity and protect their “territory” in the face of the challenges of the circulation of disinformation?

3. *The strategies deployed by other claim-makers, in particular those at the transnational level with the media and journalists.* How do scientists, science communicators, activists, and policymakers seek access to the media space? What resources are mobilized, and what are their conflicts and alliances (including with journalists)? How do they negotiate their points of view on this subject to be present in the media? This axis therefore seeks to go beyond a media-centric vision of this object by looking at the roles of other claim-makers in making this public problem visible.

4. *The transnational circulation of the problem of scientific disinformation.* This axis focuses on the role of journalists and the media as transnational claim-makers. How do discourses on scientific disinformation circulate between different national public agendas? What are the similarities and differences in how this issue is framed in distinct media spaces? Who are the actors in the journalistic world responsible for the transfer and translation of these discourses between different countries (Hassenteufel, 2005)? What are the preferred national and international sources of information when denouncing or seeking solutions for this problem?

We invite interested researchers to submit a proposal by **June 15, 2023**, to journalisme-scientifique.chaire@com.ulaval.ca. Please indicate on the document the name(s) and affiliation(s) of the author(s), a title, an abstract (300 words in Word format), a list of references cited and the axis of the Colloquium to which the proposal is related. The proposed papers must necessarily start from empirical research (corpus or field). Proposals can be submitted in **English** or **French**. Special attention will be given to papers that have a comparative ambition or that seek to highlight the different national configurations of the problem of scientific disinformation. Scientific journalism, doctoral students and researchers from the “Global South” are welcome to submit proposals.

Key dates:

- Launch of the call for papers: May 1st, 2023
- Proposals due. June 15, 2023
- Announcement of results – July 15, 2023
- Conference: February 28 – Mars 1, 2024

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