The Corona Truth Wars: Where Have All the STS'ers Gone When We Need Them Most?

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The current corona pandemic disrupts the entire world like and threatens not only public health, but our economies, social relations, democracies, rule of law, mental well-being and more. While we may have more understanding of the Sars-Cov-2 virus than half a year ago, much of what it does and how to combat it is still uncertain, despite a dazzling amount of research on it. That may be logical when new issues arise, but the situation is complicated by the fact that this quest for truthful knowledge about the virus is entangled with various (geo)political dynamics, government policy pressures, media reporting, platform moderation and public understandings of it all. It is therefore quite unclear what information is reliable, which experts to follow and what (epistemic) authorities to trust. Science and Technology Scholars are perfectly equipped with concepts, theories and methods to help us understand these complex dynamics, and guide us through the fog of uncertainty and manipulation. Yet they seem remarkably absent in public *and* scientific debates. What is going on?

Leaning on established expertise? Or who else to trust?

Now that many European countries face rising numbers of Sars-Cov-2 infections and governments installed renewed lockdowns and other severe mitigation measures, public discussions about what to do gain much traction and urgency again. On one side of the spectrum we have people who regard Sars-Cov-2 as a highly dangerous 'killer virus' that needs to be contained as much as possible, while on the other side there are those who regard it as any other pathogen that we need to learn to live with, especially since the collateral damage of mitigation might be even greater. While there are several complex issues at stake here, the million dollar question that everybody seems to be concerned by is what strategy is best'' to deal with the spread of the coronavirus. Some countries, like Sweden and Brazil, took a radically different approach from most other countries, albeit for different reasons. Most other countries, however, compete with each other with more and more stringent mitigation measures to curb the spread of the virus. This has resulted in a remarkable global accordance never before achieved outside of wartime, perhaps in human history. But how should we assess and evaluate the various answers to this burning question? How do we compare the course of this pandemic across different contexts with different social, cultural, demographic and political characteristics that obviously influence the impact the crisis?

Governments in most countries lean heavily on their public health authorities, and in particular on their virologists and epidemiologists, for advice on how to deal with this crisis. While this appears

to make good sense—they are after all the most directly relevant experts and institutions—they also have rather specific ways of looking at the pandemic. The psychological, political, socio-logical, cultural and economic dimensions of this crisis are generally not part of their equations, while the implications and consequences of the pandemic play out in these domains as well. Even stronger put, disciplines such as epidemiology are myopic without social scientific understandings of how people behave (with the virus) in different contexts. If this pandemic has revealed anything, it is that mono-disciplinarity simply won't do to sufficiently tackle the complexities of this 'wicked problem' that affects so many domains of our lives and societies. In the meantime, fierce and often emotional debates on the justness of government strategies abound on daily talk-shows, news-papers and social media platforms alike. Afore-mentioned epidemiologists and virologists are omnipresent and rather dominant, but a multitude of other experts and actors, often with competing interests, fight in these arenas of public debate for their own position and (selectively) support their arguments with all kinds of facts, figures, and studies that would prove their points. But what to make of this all? Who is right? Whose knowledge and expertise to trust? And what is wisdom in this situation? Citizens are left with either trusting the (public health) authorities and the media that remarkably follows, or resort to alternative sources of information and expertise.

STS scholars could contribute greatly to such complex discussions between various publics, experts and authorities in which knowledge, politics and values are so intimately intertwined. They can help move public debate beyond prevalent simplistic oppositions between science vs politics, facts vs opinions, information vs manipulation, solidarity vs freedom, public health vs economy, lockdowns vs viral explosion. Realities are multi-layered and full of many shades of grey, efforts to reduce to such complexities to simple dichotomies are, in essence, political. They prioritize certain aspects over others. STS scholars can highlight such processes, address the ambiguity, and show what effects such reductions have. Moreover, they can put forward alternatives that do right to the complexity of the situation.

Following Roger A. Pielke Jr. (2007) insightful work on the multiple roles to choose from as scientists depending on the degree of scientific and political consensus around a certain issue, STS'ers could take the role now of the "honest broker" given the high knowledge and value uncertainty of how to best deal with the current corona crisis. We would help public and political debate by clarifying and critically interrogating existing policy options and identifying new ones through the integra-tion of various stakeholder concerns. Because the corona pandemic is far from a medical or public health issue alone, but instead affects *all* aspects of life, this would be an opportune and desirable strategy to take. But STS'ers seem nowhere to be found in current public and political debates on the corona crisis.

Conspiracy theories as STS research objects

One rather dominant stream of alternative infor-mation flows from the so-called conspiracy theory media outlets and actors that I research (Harambam, 2020a). Since the start of the corona pandemic, various suspicions, critiques, and alle-gations about what is *really* going on emerged. Questions arose about the (alleged man-made) origins of the virus, the way it makes people sick, the geopolitical games involved, the pro-portionality of the mitigation measures taken, the suspended civil rights, the possible connec-tion with 5G, the rise of totalitarian policies and regimes, the way we measure corona infections and count covid-19 deaths, the politics of possible cures and medications, and of course, the sinis-ter plans of Bill Gates, Big Pharma and the WHO in this all. Those variegated cultural expressions are indiscriminately labelled as conspiracy theo-ries and the object of stigmatization and censor-ship (Harambam, 2020b). Various commentators in both media and science condemn those "bla-tant falsehoods" as bizarre, irrational, and danger-ous ideas endangering public health. The WHO director-general Ghebreyesus argued in line that "we're not just fighting a pandemic; we're fight-ing an *infodemic*" (Zarocostas, 2020: 676). Social media platforms followed in an unique concerted effort to curb the spread of "covid-19 misinforma-

tion" by aggressively removing content and actors that deviate from WHO-guidelines. But does that do right to complexity of the situation we are in, where truthful knowledge of the coronavirus and especially about how to deal with it, is far from settled. WHO guidelines or not.

While *some* of those conspiracy ideas may indeed be clearly ludicrous, far-fetched, and dangerous, others qualify to be more intensively researched from an STS perspective. To give just a few of those examples: think of the politicization of potential cures, such as the way (research on) hydroxychloroquine is advanced by some, from Trump to "rogue" scientists such as Didier Raoult and Zev Zelenko, and suppressed by others (Sayare, 2020); the way public health authorities measure corona infections via PCR testing and how certain (arguable) cycle thresholds (ct) are chosen to indicate an infection or not (Mandavilli, 2020); what covid-19 deaths actually mean, did people die with *or* because of the coronavirus? And what incentive structures may influence their reporting (Hempton and Trabsky, 2020); how these numbers are uncritically and without meaningful context portrayed in media and inform official (lockdown) policies (Newton, 2020); the way scientific knowledge on the virus and treatments of Covid-19 is produced by certain (dubious) actors, leading to retractions in major medico-scientific journals (Davey, 2020); the way epidemiological models are (mis)used to predict the spread of virus and how that informs official public health policy (Rhodes et al., 2020); how respectable scientists going against the orthodoxy to eradicate the coronavirus by means of stringent lockdown measures are politicized, silenced and shunned in their efforts to point to the many adverse effects of such policies (Clarke, 2020) or the complex entanglement of philanthropic actors, pharmaceutical companies, (supra)national governments, and WHO in the long run for a working vaccine (McGoey, 2015). The global scientific knowledge production on Sars-Cov-2 and Covid-19 is a true battle ground on which (geo)political games, corporate interests, institutional dynamics, professional ideologies, media reporting and popular opinion influence the road to reliable information about the crisis we so desperately need to combat it. Looking at the major STS journals and STS asso-ciations shows no mentions of STS'ers working on the particular controversies of the contemporary corona truth wars described above. How can this be? Isn't the current corona "infodemic", in a new sense of the word, the perfect post-truth crisis on which various STS'ers can shine their lights?

Emerging corona STS research networks and infrastructures

There are, fortunately, some STS'ers working on the various implications and consequences of the corona crisis. Kim Fortun's Disaster STS Network is a wonderful initiative bringing scholars and research questions together to "follow and analyze COVID-19 as it plays out in different settings" [1]. Scott Knowles's *CovidCalls* podcasts are wonderful and span many different topics, from "Comedy in the Covid-19 Era" to "Medical Education in the Pandemic" [2]. The *Social Anthropology Special Forum* gives a great global oversight of various engagements with Covid-19, ranging from "creative writing to complex theoretical formulations, from deeply personal reflections to ethnographic accounts and political and economic analyses" (Soto Bermant and Ssorin-Chaikov, 2020: 2). Deborah Lupton's special issue in *Health Sociology Review* presents various intriguing perspectives on how the corona crisis manifests itself across our globe (Lupton, 2020). There is the 'COVID-19 Clinical Research Coalition', a global network of interdisciplinary "change makers building collaborative solutions in low-resource settings"[3], whose 'Social Science Working Group' (including STS journal editor Salla Sariola), supports and promotes social scientific research on various ethical issues, biomedical research, clinical trials, and public health responses across the globe[4]. She also wrote an insightful piece with two colleagues in the Finish journal of the Political Science Association on the multidisciplinary complexities of the pandemic and the situatedness of (successful) response dynamics (Butcher et al., 2020). Indeed, no one-size-fits-all solution will do.

And there is more: editors and presidents of STS journals (Sismondo, 2020), networks[5] and associations[6, 7] highlight the special role of STS to provide policy guidance, and urge individual STS'ers to step up since their expertise is crucial. Joan

Fujimura had an excellent subplenary with three other STS'ers on this topic at the 2020 4S/EASST conference arguing that "STS can help us understand and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by offering accounts of the political ecologies of the virus that map how power relations till the social, spatial, and epistemological grounds over which it travels"[8]. Lastly, the EASST Twitter hashtag[9] is a great initiative to make visible the works/blogs of STS'ers on covid-19. Annalisa Pelizza shared many relevant tweets highlighting the issues I raise here, for example, this statement by the Nuffield Council of Bioethics urging the "authorities to take sensitive ethical and political covid19 decisions" through public deliberation and not just by expert groups[10]. Michela Cozza pointed to an article on the "Swedish Case" and paraphrased Sheila Jasanoff, "No single policy – and no corona strategy – is given by scientific knowledge, or evidence, alone"[11], and another to a "Covid-19 controversy attempt to close it" regarding claims of Nobel laureate Luc Montagnier "that the novel coronavirus is man-made and contains genetic material of HIV"[12]. Sarah de Rijcke shared a post with a repository of "resources for understanding fundamental perspectives and insights of the #COVID19 pandemic"[13].

Great potential, little action?

So there are STS initiatives and activities happening around the corona crisis, but is this it? Perhaps I have been overlooking certain public debate platforms where STS'ers are active, perhaps there are national public discussions that I am not aware of, perhaps I have missed articles or commentaries by STS scholars in the media, and perhaps I am just too impatient as some STS'ers may already be working on these issues. Indeed, STS scholars may have received "pandemic funding" as most national science foundations issued great amounts of research funding to stimulate corona research. #Covid19 has become the new scientific bandwagon to jump on (Fujimura, 1988). To give a good example, Roger Pielke Jr. received a (US) National Science Foundation Rapid Response Research (RAPID) grant to lead a comparative, international evaluation of the way science (advice) was able to influence how countries and

their leaders have responded to the pandemic, and how that played out for its citizens[14]. While analyses from this project are, obviously, not to be expected soon, the blog [15] of this research project publishes relevant pieces on the entanglement of politics, technologies and science (advice). There may be many more new STS research projects starting at this moment, studying the complexities of the pandemic and how to best deal with it, but can we hear about them?

It remains remarkable, to say the least, that our community has been so silent in the public domain on arguably the greatest wicked problem instantly paralyzing our worlds. Where are the Collins' and Evans' who can help our various publics understand the value of experts and their role in society? Where are the Fuller's who can help us grasp the political games currently being played in the name of truth? Where are the Jasanoff's who can say more about how different political cultures and democratic societies influence how they tackle the crisis? Where are the Gieryn's who can explain us about how the boundaries of science are being stretched by certain actors and pushed back by others. Where are the Bowker's and Star's to help us through the various forms of classification and numerical manipulation? Where are the Latour's who can show us the complex entanglement of scientific knowledge production with other (commercial and state) actors? Where are the Mol's who can explain how the virus exists as multiple depending on its uptake in different socio-material constellations? I can go on with many more classic examples of what STS has to offer, but where are such analyses? And why are STS scholars working on these topics not visible?

From inward looking to taking center stage

The abovementioned initiatives and publications show that there are STS scholars attentive to the issues I raise in this commentary, but they are also rather *inward* looking, focusing on our fellow scholars. While it is important to stimulate academic discussions and productions on this topic, and we surely need more of that, we also need STS scholars to be present in public and political debates as they steer the course of history. Many

medical experts, predominantly virologists and epidemiologists of our public health institutes, take the center stage now in daily talk shows and parliamentary advisory groups alike. But where are we, my fellow STS'ers, in these important spaces to share our expert perspectives and provide the necessary contextualizations?

I can offer a few tentative explanations that may be helpful in order to achieve more impact of our discipline. First, there are several *internal* reasons why STS'ers are rather absent in public and political debates: STS'ers may study controversies as they unfold, but prefer to hold their analyses private until the action is over so that no rushed conclusions are drawn. STS'ers are often advocates of 'Slow Science', as Isabelle Stengers puts it (2018), arguing that the quality of scientific research benefits from diverging from the neoliberal logic of increasing performance and output. Following her line of thought, Stengers also argues that we must engage openly and honestly with the various publics we encounter about the promises and limits of scientific research. That may be a call to remember at this moment. Obviously, STS'ers are not one of a kind. And the internal tensions between different STS communities, or even between our own professional identities, may obstruct a clear STS sound in public debate as we still struggle to match conceptual analytical work and the desire to bring about societal change (Sariola et al., 2017). A related third internal reason may be the inaccessibility of much STS work. Despite upholding the democratization of knowledge of as virtue, STS can often turn rather esoteric: it's research output (books, articles, reports) are full of neologisms and unconventional use of words and their meanings. For the outside world, it is often hard to understand, let alone implement our insights in public health interventions or public debates without our concrete help. There may be good academic reasons for that, but it could explain the invisibility of STS'ers in public and policy debate. Should we think more about translation?

Next to such internal reasons, there are external explanations as well that may play a role here: first, many of us are struggling with the impact of the crisis on our daily (work) lives, trying to keep all the balls in the air. Think of the (burden-some) transition to online teaching, the redesigning of research projects now that empirical, and especially ethnographic, research is complex to arrange, and there is a fall-out of colleagues that either got sick due to Covid-19 or are simply burned out. More generally speaking, it is hard to expect that STS scholars can redirect their research focus as fast as a new issue arises, no matter how important that topic may be. Institutional and funding rigidity applies. There is a rat-race for Covid-19 funding, shifting our focus to writing research grants, instead of taking a stage in public debate. We can expect social and professional incentive structures that prioritize the scientific output over public engagement to have influence, especially when such may go against prevalent orthodoxies. The narrow medical focus dominating the discourse and policy of the pandemic may have impeded the interdisciplinary patchwork of STS to get through the right circles. Lastly, we simply may have not been as well-connected to political and media elites to allow for an easy entrance.

This absence of STS'ers in public and political debates is a serious missed opportunity for us not only to show the value of our expertise, but to contribute concretely to the course of this pandemic when we seem caught between the Scylla of lockdowns and the Charybdis of letting the virus just go loose. STS'ers are the perfect navigators in these troubled times: we understand the lure and danger of both monsters, but we can open ways and develop various means to steer clear from both disasters. Technocrats and detached political elites are pushing through policies that are de-politicized under the rubric of "there is no other way but lockdown", various information gatekeepers stifle democratic debate in the name of "suppressing harmful content", while populists, conspiracy theorists and outright demagogues tap on the fears and concerns of affected communities without offering viable alternatives. I have tried to intervene in public debates in The Netherlands, arguing several times that the science of the corona crisis is far from settled, that we need to explore and carefully evaluate multiple options out of the crisis, that a diversity of scientific perspectives should advice governments in their policies, and that the least

vocal and politically powerful communities that are hit the hardest by the crisis (the young, the lower social classes, the small business owners, the arts and culture) should have more say[16]. But I am a young scholar, without tenure nor much authority, and struggling with the impact of the crisis as well, so I could definitely need more support. Now that the corona truth wars are getting more fierce, and the stakes and undesirable consequences of current policies higher, we need STS scholars to connect, speak up and deploy their expertise and knowledge for the sake of our well-being and the future of our democratic societies. So let's start connecting and making ourselves more visible and part of both public and political debates.

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Notes

1   https://disaster-sts-network.org/content/transnational-disaster-sts-covid-19-project

2   https://slowdisaster.com/covid-calls-2/

3   https://covid19crc.org/about-us/

4   https://covid19crc.org/research-areas/social-science/

5   https://twitter.com/SciAsCulture/status/1239158507053727749

6   https://www.4sonline.org/item/presidents_message_21_july_2020

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8   https://www.easst4s2020prague.org/subplenaries/

9   https://twitter.com/hashtag/STScovid19

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13   https://twitter.com/sarahderijcke/status/1250542830419873808

14   https://escapecovid19.org/about/

15   http://blog.escapecovid19.org/

16   E.g.: http://theconversation.com/why-we-should-not-treat-all-conspiracy-theories-the-same-140022: https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/socioloog-harambam-we-zetten-complotdenkers-te-gauw-weg-als-gekkies~b1942c88/; https://www.nu.nl/weekend/6053009/socioloog-harambam-complotdenkers-hebben-soms-gewoon-een-punt.html?redirect=1#coral_talk_wrapper; https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/739300390/rutte-moet-eerlijker-zijn