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Editorial

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Tribal epistemologies and the discursive construction of COVID-19 knowledge

Even as the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, which at the time of writing had taken the lives of nearly 7 million people, recedes in the rear-view mirror for most of us, its impact on our societies persists in the form of economic disruption, widened inequalities, lingering mental health challenges, persistent distrust in institutions and governments, and continued political polarisation around issues such as vaccinations (The British Academy 2021). One of the most enduring effects of the pandemic is the effect that it had on people's ability to agree on basic scientific facts and to establish empirical common ground upon which to discuss the pandemic. Not only have many of the conspiracy theories that emerged in the early days of the pandemic persisted in public discourse, but they have also been joined by new forms of "pandemic revisionism" (Murdoch and Caufield 2023) which argue that public health measures such as lockdowns had no effect on mortality or even that the excess deaths during the period of the pandemic had nothing to do with COVID.

While the disruption of our epistemic landscape associated with COVID-19 tells us much about how the trauma of natural disasters can distort our individual and collective perceptions of reality and open the door to myriad forms of mis- and disinformation, it also tells us something about how, even in the best of circumstances, people's grasp of reality is vulnerable not just to individual cognitive distortions, but also to partisan prejudices. What we believe is often based chiefly on what other people in our group believe, and the strength with which we hold (and proclaim) these beliefs is often associated with the strength of our loyalty to the group. This holds not just for ideological positions, such as the proper role of government in looking after the health of the populace, but also for more basic understandings about what is a "fact" (such as the fact of the efficacy of vaccines). It doesn't help that the "facts" that people are exposed to are often limited by the social networks that they are part of.

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In a much cited article published by *Vox* media in 2017, climate journalist David Roberts (Roberts 2017) used the term "tribal epistemologies" to describe the situation in Trump's America in which partisans were increasingly unable to engage in productive debates around scientific and policy issues, not because they held different opinions about the most effective way to respond to problems, but because their ways of evaluating facts and defining problems to begin with were based less and less on common standards of reasoning and more and more on political affiliation and allegiance to cultural "tribes". "Information is evaluated," he writes, "based not on conformity to common standards of evidence or correspondence to a common understanding of the world, but on whether it supports the tribe's values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders. 'Good for our side' and 'true' begin to blur into one" (para. 12).

Although the existence of "epistemological silos" seems a particular characteristic of the present age, dominated by populist politicians who do their best to promote polarisation and distrust in mainstream representations of facts, philosophers, sociologists and scholars of science and technology have long observed the manifold ways in which "knowledge and identity live in relationship with one another" (Moje 2011: 49). Back in the 1950s, information scientists Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera (1952) coined the term "social epistemology", arguing that problems of knowing are never just individual, cognitive matters, but rather complex issues of social organization and social identity. Over the past seven decades since this observation, the study of the role of social factors in people's acquisition and use of knowledge has taken a variety of forms, from "classical" approaches, which confine themselves to studying how social factors affect individual epistemology, to more postmodern approaches which view knowledge itself as socially constructed (Floridi 2002). A good example of the latter approach is the ground-breaking work of Bruno Latour (1987), whose studies of the social practices of scientists revealed how scientific knowledge is not solely the result of empirical evidence, but also depends on a range of social and political processes involving factors such as individual reputation and disciplinary alliances. Another example is the stance taken by feminist epistemologists, with their focus on the situated nature of knowledge and the way gender, in particular, situates the knowing subject (see for example Longino 1990, 1994). Cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber (2017) have gone so far as to challenge the privileged status of *reason* as a kind of "cognitive superpower" unique to humans, arguing that reason is more accurately seen as an *interactional tool* that people use to show others who they are and who they think others are.

Where sociolinguists and applied linguists have contributed to debates around social epistemologies has been in highlighting both the ways in which epistemologies are *discursively accomplished* and how epistemological frameworks themselves serve as *communicative resources* in macro-political debates in public discourse and

in the micro-politics of everyday interaction. Such insights have come chiefly from interactional sociolinguistic work on stance (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009), work on disciplinary discourses in genre theory and applied linguistics (Hyland 2007; Swales 1990), critical discourse analytical approaches (see for example Graham and Rooney 2001), especially those adopting Foucaultian perspectives (see for example Milani 2009), and literacy studies, especially Lillis and Scott's (2007) focus on the episte-mological dimensions of academic literacies and Bhatt and McKenzie's (2019) work on digital technologies and "epistemologies of ignorance".

An important dimension often hinted at in such work but not yet fully addressed is the affective and antagonistic dimensions of social epistemologies, the ways in which "epistemic communities" (Haas 1989) can sometimes devolve into "tribalism", particularly in the current circumstances of neoliberalism, globalisation, and eco-nomic and environmental crisis. Here, Maffesoli's (1996) notion of the 'neo-tribe' is useful: the idea that more traditional forms of social organization are giving way to dis-individuated groupings that are simultaneously more ephemeral and more ter-ritorial, facilitated by the emotional and spatial dynamics of post-industrial social life. This line of thinking has been recently taken up by sociolinguists in their attempts to characterize new forms of community that form around particular configurations of communicative resources and social practices ranging from memes to conspiracy theories (see for example Blommaert's [2017] examination of the "Manosphere"). Understanding this "weaponization" of epistemology is, of course, made even more complex in the context of the "new epistemologies" made possible by digital media (Lankshear 2002), in which traditional mechanisms for evaluating knowledge are undermined and the circulation of information is gov-erned by algorithms designed to maximize profit by reinforcing group allegiances and encouraging the emotions of outrage and antagonism towards other "tribes".

This special issue aims to explore questions of how knowledge is dynamically produced through discourse and the role that "knowledge-in-action" plays in developing and maintaining identities and group allegiances (Moje 2011) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A wide range of practices in which epistemo-logical conflicts and incongruities were implicated are addressed, including mask wearing, naming practices, the representation of scientific knowledge to lay-people, intercultural (mis)communication, nationalism, and online practices of argumentation. The papers focus not just on the relationship between knowledge and ways of representing it (Fairclough 2000; Lemke 1995), but also on how *ways of knowing* unfold in and drive interactions between institutions, communities and individuals, opening up and closing off routes to identification and belonging. All of these papers come from a consortium of discourse analysts from the UK and Hong Kong who worked together on issues related to COVID-19 during the pandemic (see https://viraldiscourse.com).

The special issue begins with a consideration of "disciplinary discourses" (Hyland 2007) around COVID-19 by Christoph Hafner, Sylvia Jaworska and Tongle Sun, focusing on how experts from different disciplines (sciences, social sciences, medicine) presented evidence for knowledge claims in "expert opinion articles" in newspapers. Hearkening back to the social epistemology of Latour, they remind us of the constructedness of all knowledge, even "scientific" knowledge, and of the differences in the ways scientists from different disciplines argue about knowledge. They found, for example, that, while medical *practitioners* tended to favour sensory or experiential evidence for their claims, medical *scientists* were more likely to cite authorities and to be more tentative in their knowledge claims. Lawyers and social scientists also cited the claims of authorities, but more often than not, to undermine or critique them. The most important thing that this paper reveals is the *diversity* of "expert information" that was available to the public during the pandemic – diverse not just in its claims, but, more importantly, in the kinds of epistemologies it promoted.

Neville Chi Hang Li, Carmen Lee, and Rodney Jones are also interested in the kinds of claims and evidence used by people from different professional and political tribes to argue about the pandemic. Their focus, however, is on arguments not about public policy or medical practices, but about what to *call* the virus. Examining two high profile instances in the US and Hong Kong in which public figures referred to SARS-CoV2 as the "Chinese virus" or the "Wuhan virus", they explore how partisans with different tribal affiliations in these different political contexts formulated arguments for and against these naming practices. Their study is based on both news reports of public statements by politicians and scientists and a collection of readers' comments on these news reports. Using van Dijk's (1998) concept of the "ideological square", they show that even argumentation strategies that appeared on the surface to be based on logic, scientific reasoning or arguments about public health ultimately served to establish or maintain boundaries between geo-political regions (the US and China) and/or political tribes – Trump supporters and non-Trump supporters in the US, and pro-establishment and pro-democracy camps in Hong Kong. Their analysis illustrates how, as Hui (2020: para 4) puts it, "in the combustible mix of a public health crisis and geopolitical rivalries, names do far more than convey information. They draw battle lines."

The role of "culture", nationalism and geopolitical rivalries in the discursive construction of knowledge is also the theme of the next two papers, both of which explore these issues through the lens of *stance* (Du Bois 2007). In their examination of arguments about COVID-19 on the Chinese internet, Zhu Hua and Li Wei identify a new cultural discursive practice referred to with the label *dui* (怼), which started out as a form of playful banter but morphed, during the pandemic, into a politically charged practice of signalling "tribal" identity – especially when it came to showing

one's loyalty to China and one's antagonism towards China's "enemies". Zhu Hua and Li Wei trace the enregisterment of this discursive practice by analysing the stance-taking and metadiscourse of people online who proported to be engaging in this practice while arguing about COVID-19. Their analysis highlights how socio-cultural factors such as geopolitical conflict and the politicization of health practices can lead to changes in discourse practices that can have polarising effects.

In her analysis of YouTube videos made by Western speakers of Chinese for Chinese audiences about the mask wearing practices in their home countries (the US and the UK), Jenifer Wing Yee Ho focuses more on the multimodal dimensions of stancetaking and how it supports tribal thinking and cultural stereotyping. She shows how the influencers she studies use different multimodal resources to communicate their epistemic, affective and relational stances towards the people they portray in their videos, their intended Chinese audience, and the practice of mask wearing, and reveals how these strategies were sometimes used in ways that accentuated "tribal" differences between Chinese and "Westerners", and some-times used in ways that downplayed differences and highlighted more universal values such as generosity and empathy.

Although most of the other papers in this issue deal with the antagonistic dimensions of "tribal epistemologies", the final paper, by Rodney Jones, Sylvia Jaworska and Zhu Hua, is the one that most strongly showcases their *affective* dimensions. Based on a study of Chinese students studying in UK universities during the pandemic, Jones and his colleagues demonstrate how the "tribal epistemologies" of their participants developed iteratively through their everyday use of space and negotiations of interculturality. They focus particularly on how the emotions of fear, anger, worry and affection influenced how Chinese students formulated knowledge about the virus and managed their relationships with fellow students, flatmates, and friends and family members back home. While they show how participants' emotional investment in their own particular ways of thinking about the pandemic and their readiness to see other people's behaviour though a lens of epistemic deficit sometimes led students to divide themselves into "camps", usually based on ethnicity, there were also moments when the positive affects of mutual concern and friendship helped them to transcend tribal thinking and find common ground.

Taken together, these papers reveal the many different distinctions along which tribal divisions can be formed such as disciplinary differences, political differences, and cultural differences, and how, during times of crisis, people often orient more strongly to these differences, retreating into the security of their own tribes. At the same time, they show the ways these social and relational boundaries often form the scaffolding upon which people erect their understanding of the world. Finally, and most importantly, they illustrate the role that discourse plays in negotiating tribal boundaries and epistemological differences and sometimes in transcending them.

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