

# **Covid-19, Expertise and Media Conflicts in Italy: Going beyond Binary Categorizations on (Dis) Trust in Science**

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## **Abstract**

The spread of the SARS-Cov-2 virus has enormously increased the media exposure of scientists, some of whom have become well-known and even popular. However, it may also have signalled the beginning of an unexpected decline in public trust towards them. Responsibility for this can be ascribed not only to distortions in the communication of scientific knowledge by the media, but also to dynamics that exist within the scientific community and how they have been expressed in the media.

In this paper, two research directions were followed: firstly, two conflicts between experts that animated the public debate in Italy during the Sars-Cov-2 outbreak were analysed. Second, we conducted a pilot study on a sample of about 4,000 readers of two online Italian newspapers, in order to analyse both their general view of scientific knowledge and their opinions about the way scientists communicated during the pandemic.

The results show how five latent dimensions emerged with respect to attitudes towards science and scientists. A consistent element of people seems to share a non-scientific epistemological model, unmoored to presumed certainties and absolute truths. This phenomenon, based on the responses of those interviewed, seems to be associated particularly with a critical attitude regarding the public exposure of scientists and their way of communicating in the mass media. Overall, a more nuanced view of the issue of trust towards scientists emerges, which goes beyond traditional approaches that address the question of trust in a dichotomous manner, in terms of presence of absence of it.

**Keywords:** sociology of science, trust in scientists, conflicts between experts, communication of science, mass media