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**Volume 3**

# **Transitions in Tension**

*Controversies and Tensions  
Around Ecological Transitions*

**Edited by  
Andrea Catellani and Grégoire Lits**

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## **Author Presentation**

### **François Allard-Huver**

François Allard-Huver is an Associate Professor in Strategic and Digital Communication at the University of Lorraine, Nancy, as well as co-head of the “Praxis” research team within the Center for Research on Mediations (CREM). His work deals with the issue of environmental and health controversies around food and pesticides. He is particularly interested in the question of “affairs” in the media and public sphere. He also works on risks, sustainable development and organizations, particularly on the CSR communication and public relations strategies of various actors in the public sphere (institutions, civil society, lobbies, industry). He regularly participates in symposia and conferences on the relationship between sustainable development, risk, controversies, food and communication. A former board member of the International Communication Association (ICA), he is secretary of the “Philosophy, Theory and Critique” division, a member of the management committee of the “Communication, Environment, Science and Society” (CESS) study and research group of the French Society of Information and Communication Sciences (SFSIC) and scientific director of the Academy of Controversies and Sensitive Communication (ACCS).

### **Pauline Amiel**

Pauline Amiel is the head of EJCAM and responsible for that school’s master’s program in journalism. She is also a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences, IMSIC, Aix-Marseille University - University of Toulon. Her

work focuses particularly on solutions journalism, the local press and the roles of journalists in public spaces.

## **Cyrille Bodin**

Cyrille Bodin holds a PhD in Information and Communication Sciences and is an associate researcher at the Research Group on Communication Issues (GRESEC), Grenoble Alpes University. His work focuses on the mediation and mediatization of science, on environmental and/or socio-scientific controversies, as well as on engagements of researchers and scientific institutions in public communication.

## **Andrea Catellani**

Andrea Catellani is a Professor of Communication at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCLouvain, Belgium). He co-leads the “Communication, Environment, Science and Society” study and research group of the French Society of Information and Communication Sciences (SFSIC); he coordinates the international research project “Overcoming Obstacles and Disincentives to Climate Change Mitigation” (2020-2024). He has published various articles and works, notably on environmental communication and rhetoric, discourses on the social responsibility of organizations, the semiotic approach to organizations, ethics in communication, and the relationship between religion and communication in the digital world.

## **Mikaël Chambru**

Mikaël Chambru is a Lecturer in Social Sciences at Grenoble Alpes University and scientific co-coordinator of Labex ITTEM (Innovations and Territorial Transitions in the Mountains). His research focuses on publicizing science,

public controversies, and socio-environmental mobilizations.

## **Philippe Chavot**

Philippe Chavot is a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at the University of Strasbourg. He is a member of the Interuniversity Laboratory in Education and Communication Sciences (LISEC-UR 2310) and coordinates the work of the social sciences group of the Interdisciplinary Thematic Institute “Geosciences for the Energy Transition” (ITI GéoT). His work focuses on science in the media, mediation and consultation mechanisms, and socio-technological controversies.

## **Cécilia Claeys**

Cécilia Claeys is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Perpignan Via Domitia. Her research focuses on land use planning conflicts, recreational uses of nature and environmental risks.

## **Amélie Coulbaut-Lazzarini**

Amélie Coulbaut-Lazzarini is an Associate Professor in Information and Communication Sciences at GRESEC, Grenoble Alpes University, as well as a member of the management committee GER COMENSS. Situated in environmental communication, her current research explores the notion of human/non-human reliance and links, particularly in mid-mountain areas and in connection with the public communications of regional natural parks. Her research deals with the socio-ecological transition issues of territories and integrates the analysis of innovative and sustainable communication, awareness-raising, mediation practices and processes.

## **Quentin Daveau**

Quentin Daveau holds a master's degree in Scientific and Technical Communication and Culture from Grenoble Alpes University.

## **Orélie Desfriches-Doria**

Orélie Desfriches-Doria is a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at Paris 8 University and a researcher at the Paragraph laboratory. Her research focuses on argumentation modeling and controversy mapping, information control and critical thinking. She is a member of the study and research group on ethics and digital technology in information-communication (GENIC).

## **Jules Dilé-Toustou**

Jules Dilé-Toustou holds a PhD in Information and Communication Sciences at LERASS, Toulouse. He is mainly interested in analyzing discourse on web platforms, particularly from activist perspectives. He also teaches at the IUT of Castres where he teaches introductory courses in humanities and social sciences and the socioeconomics of the Internet.

## **Jean-Claude Domenget**

Jean-Claude Domenget is a Senior Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at the University of Franche-Comté. He is responsible for the Conception, Creation, Mediations (CCM) division of the ELLIADD laboratory, vice-president of the professional relations commission and in charge of relations with the study and research groups (GER) within the SFSIC. His research focuses on the uses of socio-digital media, innovation through uses, particularly in the field of cycling mobility, digital professional identities and professionalization in communication professions,

temporalities in information-communication. He is also developing advanced thinking regarding research ethics in a digital context within the GER on ethics and digital technology in information-communication (GENIC), which he co-founded and scientifically co-leads.

## **Catherine Dominguès**

Catherine Dominguès is a Senior Researcher at LASTIG (ENSG/IGN and Gustave Eiffel University), a specialist in natural language processing. She has notably worked on the analysis of feelings in the narratives of Spanish Republicans and their cartographic representation. She was also part of the PARVIS project, which aimed to analyze representations of the city of the future in science fiction narratives. Her current work is based on the *Cahiers citoyens*, a corpus of volunteered citizen's words collected as part of the French *Grand débat national* and during the "gilets jaunes" movement.

## **Antoine Gaboriau**

Antoine Gaboriau is a PhD student at CESPRA (EHESS), working on the consequences of implementing digital participation tools in local political-administrative systems in Barcelona, Geneva and Toulouse. He has also worked at Open Source Politics, a company specializing in digital participation platforms and the processing of data derived from them.

## **Bruno Lefèvre**

Bruno Lefèvre holds a PhD in Information and Communication Sciences, attached to LabSIC-USPN. His research in socioeconomics and political economy focuses on the interdependencies between industrial strategies, public decision-making modalities, territories and civil

society, focusing on the discourses and representations of these different actors.

## **Grégoire Lits**

Grégoire Lits is a Lecturer in Media Sociology at the School of Communication and Journalism of Louvain and co-director of the Observatory for Research on Media and Journalism (ORM) of UCLouvain. His research focuses on the flow of information in public spaces in times of crisis, as well as how different public issues evolve over time. In this context, he has been conducting research for 15 years, analyzing the trajectory of various public problems such as: radioactive waste management, European policies to combat poverty, management of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic or efforts to combat misinformation at the European level.

## **Catherine Loneux**

Catherine Loneux is a Professor in Information and Communication Sciences at Rennes 2 University. She is a researcher at PREFics, EA 7469 (multilingualisms, representations, French-language expressions - Information, communication, sociolinguistics). The communication of organizations and the communicational dimension of the dynamics of normative construction form the structure of her research journey. Her work focuses more specifically on “corporate social responsibility”, and seeks to analyze the socioeconomic, socio-legal, socio-discursive and socio-cognitive issues that these CSR phenomena underlie. Information-justification-ethical practices are studied using the analytical framework of the communication approach of organizations. To shed light on objects ranging from professional managerial environments in companies, to public institutions producing environmental and social discourses, the dynamics of

standardization, the recompositions of power relations, meanings, writings and values are analyzed.

## **Anne Masseran**

Anne Masseran is a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at the University of Strasbourg, responsible for the M2 master's program in international communication, ITIRI UDS.

## **Jeanne Pahun**

Jeanne Pahun is a PhD in political science. Her thesis, defended in 2020, is entitled "How food policies change agriculture: a comparative analysis in three regions of France". It analyzes the translation, progression and scope of the controversy embodied by the politicization of our food at the level of subnational governments. After studying the rise of the bioeconomy institutional watchword in European research policies and the operationalization of national agroecological policies, she is now a postdoctoral researcher at LISIS (INRAE), studying the role of downstream actors in the greening of agricultural producers' practices in France.

## **Céline Pascual Espuny**

Céline Pascual Espuny is a Professor of Information and Communication Sciences at Aix-Marseille University. She works on questions of behavioral change and on the circulation of environmental issues in public space. Her research has focused on sustainable development for more than 20 years. She has thus observed human and non-human mediations, socialization and rationalization processes at work in organizations. She is a member of the IMSIC research laboratory (Mediterranean Institute of Information and Communication Sciences, EA 7492). She

co-leads the “Communication, Environment, Science and Society” study and research group.

### **Catherine Quiroga Cortés**

Catherine Quiroga Cortés holds a PhD in Information and Communication Sciences at Toulouse III – Paul Sabatier University, attached to the Laboratory of Applied Studies and Research in Social Sciences (LERASS). In her doctoral thesis, she examines local information, considering its production and circulation as the result of relational and communicational processes. She is interested in the role played by socio-digital networks within local information ecosystems and questions the impact of these digital devices on the restructuring of the balance of power underlying the deployment of said processes.

### **Erika Riberi**

Erika Riberi is a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at the Faculty of Science of Aix-Marseille University, and a researcher at IMSIC (Aix-Marseille University – University of Toulon). She is interested in the presence and circulation of scientific discourses in public space (environmental communication, scientific mediation, science–society relations). She is responsible for the first year of the master’s course in scientific information and environmental mediation.

### **Brigitte Sebbah**

Brigitte Sebbah is a Professor of Information and Communication Sciences at Toulouse III – Paul Sabatier University, within LERASS. Her research focuses on digital journalism, changes in journalistic practices, online information and social movements.

## **Yeny Serrano**

Yeny Serrano is a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at the University of Strasbourg and attached to LISEC (UR 2310). She is interested in the information discourses of the mass media and their place in contexts of controversy or armed conflicts.

## **Natacha Souillard**

Natacha Souillard is a Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at Aix-Marseille University, within the IMSIC laboratory. Her research focuses on citizen participation and online social movements, the circulation of representations, discourses and narratives of environmental and ecological issues.

## **Bi Mathieu Tra**

Bi Mathieu Tra holds a PhD in Information and Communication Sciences at the University of Franche-Comté and is a member of the ELLIADD laboratory. His thesis is titled “Polyphony on socio-digital media: the case of interactions on YouTube about the Amazon forest fires”. It was supervised by Jean-Claude Domenget and Orélie Desfriches-Doria.

## **Kimberley Vandenhole**

Kimberley Vandenhole is a PhD student at the Socio-Environmental Dynamics Research Group (SONYA) at the Free University of Brussels and the Research Center for Sustainable Development at Ghent University. She studies environmental phenomena from socio-political and discursive perspectives in the context of morality and societal transformations. Interested in the socio-political and philosophical dimensions of environmental issues, she

is currently focusing on analyzing the discourse of eco-shaming.

## **Albin Wagener**

Albin Wagener is a Teacher-Researcher in language sciences. Specializing in digital, media and climate discourse analysis, he is attached to Rennes 2 University and INALCO. He also acts as a corpus study expert for foundations and companies.

## **Jean Zoungrana**

Jean Zoungrana is an Associate Lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Strasbourg. He is attached to the SAGE (Societies, Actors, Government in Europe) laboratory (UMR 7363) and a member of the social sciences group of the Interdisciplinary Thematic Institute "Geosciences for the Energy Transition". His work focuses on governmentality and citizen action in the context of consultation and controversy.

# Introduction

## Controversies and Tensions Around Ecological Transitions: For an Infocommunicational Approach

In recent years, the metaphor of the “transition”, which suggests a movement, a priori soft and smooth, from one state to another, has taken a growing place in both media and scientific discourses on the evolution of human societies. Beyond the apparent peacefulness associated with it, this term often appears in connection with issues associated with quite lively tensions and controversies, whether related to the ecology and habitability of the planet, energy policy, even the evolution of our social protection models or the evolution of our communication tools (when we talk about a society’s digital transition). It is this apparent contradiction between an imaginary of gentle evolution, of a natural change of state and the strong tensions that these changes arouse in the social body that this book attempts to elucidate by presenting different works of research from the information and communication fields, and more broadly the humanities and social sciences, focusing on the environmental and energy sphere.

The *Dictionnaire critique de l’anthropocène* (2020, p. 780) takes from Chabot (2015) the idea that we have entered the “age of transitions”, defined as a “fundamental reconfiguration of the functioning and organization of the system, faced with a tipping point”. But the notion of an ecological transition, unlike others such as “demographic transition”, indicates not so much a phenomenon as an “intention”, a “watchword prescribing practices” (ibid.), used by a wide range of actors (activists, institutional,

professional, technical, political, scientific), just as for the “digital transition”.

Like the latter, the ecological transition describes a process of “transformation during which a system passes from one regime of equilibrium to another” (Bourg and Papaux 2015, p. 780, cited by Monnoyer-Smith (2017)). The term is particularly linked to the “transition towns” movement and the transition network, a movement initiated by Rob Hopkins in England in 2005. More broadly, the notion of transition has become one of these “formulas” (Planque [2010](#)) used today in discourse dealing with the ecological situation, its consequences and perspectives for action in the political, media, economic, social, spiritual and cultural spheres (as well as the scientific, with recent research on sustainability transitions). This formula indicates a complex set of values, scientific notions, projects, projections, actions and practices involved with the transition from the current state towards a more “sustainable”, lasting and desirable condition for humans and living beings, thus partly replacing the semantics of sustainable development (Theys [2020](#)), and also implying “the resorption of social inequalities or environmental injustices” (*Dictionnaire critique de l’anthropocène*, 2020, p. 780), as recalled by the notion of “just transition” also present in the text of the Paris climate agreement. In France and Spain, for example, there exist Ministries of Ecological Transition, even if the names quickly change.

The positive, dynamic and promising connotations of this type of expression (different from those of other expressions such as collapse, therefore with potential for euphemization) certainly help the dissemination and use of these formulas. Different actors therefore appropriate this expression within different logics and perspectives, such as those of long-term public policies, that of associations and movements oriented towards the commons and the local, or

even that of large companies (and more particularly in the energy sector). Transition makes it possible to build a positive framework, linked to the discourse of innovation, of design thinking, of participation, etc. This diversity and heterogeneity – which does not deny the existence of a “family resemblance” between the different uses – is interrogated by research in information and communication or even discourse analysis.

For its part, the expression “energy transition” is defined by the World Energy Council (2014) as “a significant structural change in an energy system”. The current transition to renewable energy is the latest energy transition, and it is driven directly by the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in this era of ongoing global climate and environmental crisis. However, as the *Dictionnaire critique de l’anthropocène* reminds us, “the energy transition is not determined in its solutions, nor in the modalities of its implementation” (2020, p. 783). Different, more or less radical models and perspectives intersect, integrating ecological issues to a greater or lesser extent. From this point of view, the energy transition and its challenges “question our relationship to the Earth” (*Dictionnaire critique de l’anthropocène* 2020, p. 784) and therefore the self-definition of societies. Here too, there is material for work in information and communication sciences (Gilbert et al. [2019](#)) and more widely in the humanities and social sciences.

This book, the result of a colloquium held at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCLouvain), Belgium, on December 16 and 17, 2021, aims to question the discourses and communicational phenomena related to ecological and energy transitions – we explicitly use the plural to indicate the complexity of the subject in question. The aim is to focus on the polemical dimension of the communication surrounding these transitions – controversies, polemics,

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