

Controversies, practices and (co)creation of knowledge about smog. Environmental activism and expert knowledge on air pollution in the context of science and technology studies

According to the risk society thesis, the rapid development of technology generates areas of insecurity. Modern technoscience does not so much create specialist knowledge; rather, it actively transforms the social world, sometimes in an unplanned direction, which leads to harmful consequences. In the Polish context, the problem of air pollution has been one of the major ecological issues for some time now. Since 2012, the issue has systematically received much publicity; the activities of Kraków city activists became a topic of national attention at the end of 2015 and beginning of 2016, and their concern was widely echoed by the public. Gradually, the problem of air pollution attracted a broad coalition of non-governmental organizations (referred to as Smog Alerts). These started to launch initiatives in different regions of Poland, with the aim of building the general public's awareness of the scale of the issue, and of influencing the local authorities to take actions to combat air pollution.

Air pollution is an ecological threat caused by human impact on the environment. It is also an extremely complex phenomenon, requiring extensive expert knowledge. On the other hand, we experience the negative effects of smog directly on our own body. Due to the discussion about the poor air quality in Poland that has been going on for some years now, we are aware that smog is harmful to our health. Citizens of the largest Polish cities are increasingly willing to express their opposition to too slow actions of public institutions or local and central authorities.

In the project, I would like to trace the controversy regarding smog, focusing mainly on the relationship between public institutions, local government representatives and environmental activists. I am most interested in how knowledge about air pollution is created and how it is used in discussions and practices. An important aspect of my research are the differences between expert knowledge – produced by using expensive measuring tools and strictly defined methodologies – and lay knowledge, which often focuses on the individual body, health or everyday life experiences. Knowledge about the extent to which smog can be a serious health risk may vary depending on whether it is produced by experts or by those involved in protecting the environment.

It is interesting that many discussions on smog arouse a lot of emotions both on the side of public institutions and experts, as well as environmental activists. In the project, I want to show that many of these discussions are related to knowledge about smog, i.e. how to collect and present data or create standards for their interpretation.

At the same time, I would like to wonder whether, despite the differences between experts and activists, it is possible to indicate some common points and whether cooperation between them is possible in order to protect air quality. I use the term 'co-creation' here, which emphasizes that expert and civic knowledge can complement each other under certain circumstances.

The main theoretical framework of the project is science and technology studies. As part of my research activities, I want to analyse existing data (documents, legal acts, reports, media reports, data visualization methods), conduct ethnographic research and carry out in-depth interviews with representatives of public institutions dealing with air quality, local government, the academic world, activists, sector employees private (whose activities are related to air quality)