

# Report *COMPACT* 2017 Training School in Tübingen

From July, 31st, until August, 4th 2017, the first training school of the Action took place at the University of Tübingen, Germany. With another training school on quantitative conspiracy theory research scheduled for 2018, this training school focused on qualitative research on conspiracy theories in a variety of academic fields related to culture and history. These research fields of the participating trainers and trainees ranged from literary and cultural studies over semiotics and anthropology to social and political science and psychology. The training school involved nineteen students from nine different countries and seven trainers from five different countries. This unique combination promoted an interdisciplinary and international dialogue between the participating scholars and students. It also granted the students the possibility to talk to trainers of their choice about their individual research projects.

Two complementary learning environments constituted the training school schedule. In the morning lectures, which took up two one-and-a-half-hour slots, the trainers shared their perspectives and individual research on conspiracy theories in one-hour-long presentations. In the remaining thirty minutes, trainers and trainees engaged in discussions about the presentation's topic, sharing their questions and ideas. "Trumped Up: the Problem of the Postmodern President" (Clare Birchall) or "The Semiotics of Conspiracy Trolling" (Massimo Leone) constituted exemplary lecture topics. In the two afternoon reading groups, which also lasted one-and-a-half hour each, the students had the opportunity to engage in critical discussions of texts on conspiracy theory assigned to them by the respective trainer. Texts ranged from Gordon Wood's "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style" to Heike Behrend's "The Rise of Occult Powers, AIDS and the Roman Catholic Church in Western Uganda." While the trainers provided a guiding structure, they left room for the students to share specific questions linked to the texts as well as the morning lectures. While the lectures aimed at providing an academic exchange particularly between the trainers, the reading groups offered a space for the students to further engage in the topics of their choice.

The formal setting of the morning and afternoon training sessions was accompanied by planned leisure activities in the afternoon and evening. While the focus of the official morning and afternoon class sessions was clearly on academic exchange about conspiracy theory research, the leisure activities allowed for networking in a more casual context. For example, a shorter first day allowed trainers and trainees to get to know each other on an afternoon punting tour on the river Neckar. In addition, all participants of the training school came together for joint dinners on three of the five school days. While these activities contributed to a pleasant atmosphere, they also provided opportunities to establish closer connections to other students and scholars of the field, thus promoting research network ties.

Interdisciplinarity, horizontal group dynamics, and a focus on future research constituted the distinguishing characteristics of the *COMPACT* 2017 Training School. Its radical interdisciplinarity offered diverse perspectives and approaches. Creating an open space for exchange in the reading groups as well as in the joint coffee breaks and leisure activities, the training school kept trainers

and trainees from separating into two closed groups. In addition, while the trainers provided an overview of the methods, approaches and perspectives of researching conspiracy theories, they also frequently highlighted remaining research questions. For many students, the training school thus represented a first step toward realizing research projects of their own.