

Call for Abstracts

**First Semiotic Symposium of Students
(SemioSyS 2026)**

SIGNS OF (MIS)TRUST: DIALOGUES ACROSS CULTURE, MEDIA, AND TECHNOLOGY

December 11, 2026

Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, HU

This symposium invites students to explore the signs, texts, and practices through which trust is performed, granted, contested, or eroded. Two fundamental questions emerge: What are the semiotic constraints and possibilities created by trust–mistrust dynamics? And how are these dynamics changing in contemporary times?

Dynamics of trust and mistrust shape how we read a news headline, interpret a politician's gesture, engage with an AI chatbot, or decide whether to believe a stranger on social media. Furthermore, trust is key to communication and semiosis itself; trust is required in the act of connecting a representation with what is represented, in having (shared) categories, and in having a voice in society (as another form of representation). The symposium is organised in the context of changing contemporary semiotic practices, from memes to machine-generated text, that reconfigure the relationship between interpreter and sign. But how is this relationship changing? Is it reinforcing or contesting trust-mistrust asymmetries across societies, or both?

The notion of suspicion is timely for the changes that contemporary societies face (e.g., AI and automation, geopolitical tensions, climate change and facts thereof). However, attention to the importance of suspicion is not new; Paul Ricoeur already expressed the notion of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' with its three masters, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, in his 1965 book *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Ricoeur reminds us that representation and interpretation are never innocent; there is always the possibility of hidden motives, structures, and desires, or the suspicion thereof. Ricoeur's work marks an awareness of a significant attitude of suspicion that runs through modern societies, especially fostered in postmodernity (cf. Nünning 2005, Olson 2003, Jaeger 2015, or Sternberg & Yacobi 2016).

From Wayne Booth's text-internal, author-intention model (1961), narrative theory moved toward locating unreliability in the reader's inference in the cognitivist/constructivist turn (Nünning 1999, 2005). Then narrative theory was refined into a typology of fallible versus untrustworthy narrators (Olson, 2003) and a discourse-level weighing of competing interpretive hypotheses (Sternberg & Yacobi, 2016). Jaeger (2015) extended the project from fiction into historiography: historians, too, narrate, select, and frame. In the context of post-truth (a term popularised in 2016 in particular due to the United States presidential election and the United Kingdom's Brexit vote), Angermüller (2018) responded to the charge that constructivist discourse analysis, by insisting truths are discursively made, inadvertently supplied the intellectual toolkit

populists now use to relativize expertise. However, rather than abandoning the constructivist premise that truths are made rather than found, he tries to save it from relativism by building in symmetrical, reflexive scrutiny of both expert and populist truth-claims. Across both trajectories of narratology and discourse, the same postmodern problem recurs: representation is always mediated, so trust must be relocated somewhere else: in the reader's cognition, or in a disciplined, non-relativist constructivism. Are the incremental developments after Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion enough to match the new challenges of contemporary society, and if so, do these challenges deepen, overturn, or demand a reworking of this hermeneutics?

We are particularly interested in how these dynamics play out across three intersecting domains:

- **Culture:** How do traditions, rituals, and collective narratives anchor or undermine trust? How does cultural discourse spread or remove trust from society?
- **Media:** How do platforms, algorithms, and visual cultures shape what we deem credible? Who gets to decide what is trustworthy or not?
- **Technology:** How do digital interfaces, algorithms, and AI determine what we should pay attention to, and is it trust-based?

These three pillars can be combined as well, for example, how cultural narratives are mediated through algorithmic platforms, or how technological interfaces reshape ritual and tradition. We invite papers that explore not only trust and mistrust, but also the grey zones of ambivalence, provisional trust, and the thresholds at which skepticism tips into cynicism or blind faith. We welcome both theoretical and empirical contributions, as well as interdisciplinary interpretations, such as through the perspectives of ethics and history.

We also welcome papers that rethink central problems and frameworks in semiotic, cultural, anthropological, linguistic, visual, other media studies, and social sciences in light of the symposium's theme. We encourage students at all levels to submit, whether you are decoding a meme, analyzing a political speech, or re-reading a classic (semiotic) text through a contemporary lens.

Submission Guidelines

Abstract length: 250-300 words + 3-5 keywords

Format: PDF or Word document

Please include: name, affiliation, academic level (Bachelor/Master/PhD), and contact email

Deadline: October 15th

[Submission link](#)

SemioSyS is hosted by the Semiotics faculty and students of ELTE University (Budapest), to promote research activities for semiotic students in ELTE's MA Semiotics program, related studies at ELTE, and semiotics students from other universities. Attendance is free of charge. The committee intends to publish **peer-reviewed conference proceedings**, allowing participants to develop their presentations into full academic articles. The symposium will be held in-person. Presentations are a **maximum of 20 minutes**, the working language of the symposium is **English**.