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Nano should not turn out like that...Analogies as prevention technologies in lay talk about nanotechnology governance

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The governance of emerging technosciences such as nanotechnology is relying on a variety of risk assessment techniques, particularly as regards health and environmental risks. But policy makers in Europe likewise hope that nanotechnology will not turn out like the debate over GMOs, thus locating risks on a socio-political level. In other words, they anticipate a similar public opposition against nanotechnology—and try to take countermeasures. Hence, the simultaneous proliferation of policy-driven public engagement initiatives on nanotechnology can be interpreted as prevention technologies employed to avoid public controversies in advance.

In this talk, we will look closer at the anticipatory tools that lay people in public engagement settings use to explore futures of nanotechnology. Building on a detailed discourse analysis of four discussion groups with Austrian lay people on different areas of nanotechnology, it will be shown how lay people use analogies as prevention technologies in order to articulate how “nano should not turn out like”, and thereby envision models for nanotechnology governance in Austria. The analysis explores how analogies are developed, (con)tested and resisted in the course of debate, as well as the significant role shared cultural resources and experiences play in anticipating possible, desirable, and avoidable socio-technical futures. The talk will also critically reflect on the general role of analogies in debates about new technosciences—their potential and limitations—and propose some practical conclusions on what policy makers may learn from lay people’s discussions to govern nanotechnology in socio-culturally robust ways.