



SO FAR, SO NEAR: THE CREATION OF THE MÉDIALAB

The médialab was founded in 2009 under the auspices of sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour (1947-2022), with the initial ambition of using digital technologies to develop an unprecedented mapping of contemporary social and political controversies and phenomena. The médialab has also guided pilot studies on the digital transformations of society now being conducted in all Sciences Po research centres.



By **Hélène Naudet**

As soon as he was appointed Research Director of Sciences Po in 2007, Bruno Latour set his sights on two areas that have since become major societal issues: the environment and digital technologies. While research on what he calls 'the politics of Earth' was already underway at Sciences Po, the digital field was completely new. Grasping it called for tools. The creation of the médialab in 2009 was a response. The new research centre needed a suitable location, equipment, staff and, of course, money. Appointed alongside Bruno Latour, Valérie Pihet, an expert on the relationship between the arts and sciences, led the project from start to finish, and began by securing funds. She obtained a sizeable grant from the Île-de-France Region (two thirds of the EUR 1.4 million invested in the project), and then configured a space to establish

the médialab. The walls of the basement at 13, rue de l'Université were demolished to make way for tiny offices in which a small team of web engineers and designers, led by technical director Paul Girard, soon started working. The masterstroke was the impressive meeting room. Padded in white and quickly dubbed the Space Odyssey, it became home to bursts of brainpower orchestrated by the médialab. It is here that Bruno Latour put into practice the key idea that digital technology can be used to connect ideas to individuals or groups, to trace the links among them, and to visualise their respective importance and interactions. The initial research involved mapping public controversies in several fields (health, gender, migration, environment, earnings, etc.) as part of an educational excellence

project supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) (French National Research Agency). These pioneers also pursued the idea of moving between the microscopic level (an individual) and the macroscopic level (a group) in order to identify the profiles of group members. They thus mostly focused on developing software that would then be used to extract data from the web reflecting the state of society, with the goal of making these tools available to as many people as possible. This research was quickly followed by the many studies on digital transformations within society thanks to which the médialab has made a name for itself.

Nicknamed the 'Space Odyssey', the meeting room of the first médialab premises, 13 rue de l'Université, Paris, 2009.

Bruno Latour at an inaugural lecture on 'The Anthropocene and Us', 28 August 2019.