



EDITORIAL

Unsung Heroes and Multiple Practices

by Tomas Moe Skjølsvold

A few weeks ago, the city of Trondheim hosted the Starmus festival, an event celebrating science, the universe, life and rock music. The festival gathered an impressive collection of older white males, in the form of esteemed scientists, Nobel laureates and astronauts, with the goal of celebrating the “true heroes” of enlightened knowledge and exploration. Starmus was draped in rhetoric about brilliance, genius, excellence and courage, cultivating metaphors where scientists emerged as athlete-rockstar-superheroes faced with the messianic challenge of educating the ignorant masses of lay-people through the gospel of capital “S” science in singular form. Stephen Hawking was the festival headliner, but could not attend due to health issues. Nevertheless, the moment of peak-festival for many was when Mr. Hawking over video-link declared that humanity has no more than 100 years left before we need to evacuate the planet and colonize another world to survive.

Commercially and in terms of publicity, the festival was a booming success. Parts of the program was broadcast on Norwegian television. The Norwegian royal family were in the audience. The festival sold many tickets. Despite scattered criticism, mainly concerning gender issues, price, and the absence of social science and humanities perspectives, the national and international media coverage was positive. At some point, the bi-annual festival deserves full-on empirical or theoretical STS-scrutiny (NJSTS would love to publish that, so consider this an open invitation). This, however, is not the time or place.

Instead, I want to address how the festival actualizes a distinction between an STS-gaze at the scientific process, and the way science tends to be framed by the media, by science funders, politicians, university management, and sometimes by scientists themselves. The latter kind of accounts portrays science as a fact-producing machine, as a unified force against medieval ignorance and a guiding star for modern societies. Science supposedly knows all, sees all, and is free of values, history, culture, politics, drama and all the things that otherwise plague our societies. Thus, it can also produce “objective” policy advice, of which I suppose Hawking’s conclusion that we should “evacuate the planet!” is meant to be an example.

As STS scholars, we have heard such stories in the past, and we have read countless studies with different narratives about the production of scientific knowledge. From such accounts, STS scholars learn that knowledge-production takes place in, and is shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. That it involves a range of specific skills and methods, that it is fraught with controversy. From Donna Haraway STS have learned that what she calls the “God-view”,

seeing everything from nowhere, is just a trick. Every scientist is situated in a social setting, a geographical space, a historical time, a cultural milieu. Every scientist has a work process, which is also situated. Every work process involves tools, skills, thoughts, all of which are all distinctly parts of place, time, and culture. STS knows that humans write scientific articles, and that the position from which these humans write their articles, is not trivial.

There are many things to be said about all of this, but in light of the current issue of NJSTS, some things deserve specific mention. The first is the ability of STS to highlight the distributed character of techno-scientific practices. Brilliant minds do not move the world on their own; they depend on un-sung heroes like technicians, assistants, curators, peers, publishers, editors. In many disciplines, they also rely on the many animals who populate laboratories, trials and experiments. In this issue, Ane Møller Gabrielsen illustrate how important animals are, by highlighting the centrality of creatures like rats, dogs and dolphins to the history and development of seemingly human-centered disciplines like psychology. Gabrielsen studies dog training, but deals with more than dog-human interaction.

Animals shape knowledge about the human, but the influence is not unidirectional. The discipline of psychology, as interpreted, translated and advanced by different practices and technologies of dog training, changes what Gabrielsen calls the very dogness of dogs, in other words, what dogs are and how they respond to practices and technologies of dog training. Science, animals, and humans then, become together.

Dog training in Gabrielsen’s study is a set of technologies, but also a practice. The notion of practice is also a key to Roger Søraa, Lina Ingeborgrud, Ivana Suboticki and Gisle Solbu’s article in this issue. The authors address a practice intimately familiar to those who work in academia: writing. Writing is a skill required to be a scholar, but we do not necessarily reflect enough on how this skill is acquired. Thinking about this as knowledge transfer from teacher to student is obviously too reductionist, and the authors discuss how the skill can be cultivated collectively in a group of peers. Here, writing becomes one element in a more collectively assembled skill-set, which includes reading, commenting and discussing academic output.

The third article in this issue deals with energy. Torgeir Kolstø Haavik, Jens Olgard Røyrvik and Catharina Lindheim highlights how the seemingly technical task of producing a new energy central and rendering it functional, is just as much a matter of power, trust



and social relations, as it is a matter of nuts and bolts. Thus, they stress how technology and politics are intertwined, as well as how making “it” work is a distributed, social accomplishment.

“Science” is not one thing; it is a whole multitude of practices, technologies and collectives enacted in so many different sites that reducing it to a singular idea will likely do “it” more harm than good. Research is clearly important, and its role in society should not be

underestimated. However, we also need a realistic understanding of the role of science in society, rooted in what actually goes on in universities and research institutions. If nothing else, events like Starmus serves to highlight the continued need to probe the practices of science from an STS perspective, to elevate the status of the countless multi-species unsung heroes of everyday research, and the multiple practices that constitutes the process of producing scientific facts.