



EDITORIAL

Spaces between: qualitative and quantitative research epistemologies

By Roger A. Søråa

There is an increasing interest in Science and Technology Studies (STS), as the field experiences growth with respect to the scope of topics, methods and theories deployed to learn and uncover epistemic practices for scientific knowledge production, technological innovations, users and producers. Traditionally, STS has been interested in fascinating case studies – often investigating and/or utilizing qualitative research method-ologies to explore quantitative methodological epistemologies – while also absorbing these, e.g. in innovation studies. In the early stages of the field, this related to the ‘cultural turn’ and the untangling of the ruling epistemic positivism, giving birth to a mode 2 rephrasing of how to understand the complex entanglement of epistemic practices of scientists and technologists.

In this Issue 7(2) of the Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies, we present to you two articles, one book review and one opinion piece that each have their own take on how knowledge is produced. Whereas the articles focus on the health domain, the book review and opinion piece focus on energy and climate – both fields that are highly relevant to STS, perhaps now more than ever due to health and environmental crises threatening anthropocentric ontologies.

The first article of this issue: “It is not a pill: Uncertainties and promises in the entanglements of qualitative and quantitative medical research” by Doris Lydahl juxtaposes a seemingly paradoxical Swedish case in which a randomized controlled trial – the golden standard of quantitative research in medicine – was used to evaluate person-centered care – which is a rather experimental qualitative approach to medical practice.

A somewhat similar focus can be seen in the second article by Dixi Louise Strand: “Reframing translational research as transactional research: An analysis of clinician-scientists’ work practices in a Danish hospital setting,” which looks into the everyday work practices and commitments of clinician-scientists in Denmark. The article problematizes the space between academia and clinical health care by asking both how multiple domains are integrated and translated by clinical-scientists and how they continually negotiate these complex interactions.

These two articles inspired our frontpage for the issue, featuring “Just a Pill.” Pills have a long history in STS research, unsurprisingly, as pills have been used as long ago as 1500 BCE. One of the drawbacks of pills is that they are hard to swallow. Medieval

remedies for this difficulty suggested coating them in gold or silver. This would, however, render them useless, as they would go directly through the digestive system with little effect. In a similar way, society today seems to be screaming for pills for a multitude of challenges – e.g. health and climate, as is the focus of this issue – even when such solutions are not easily packaged and absorbed into the system.

The issue also features a book review by Antti Silvast, who discusses two books: “The Promise of Infrastructure” (2018) and “Electrifying Anthropology: Exploring Electrical Practices and Infrastructures” (2019). The review is concerned with how anthropological approaches can address energy issues and sustainability transitions, asking how different interdisciplinary approaches dilutes different answers to these large and important questions.

These threads are also important in Anders Blok’s opinion piece “How to deploy STS to re-imagine sustainable ways of instituting climate expertise?” Working from a Danish perspective, he illustrates post-normal science discourses in the framing of the unsustainability of industrial society, drawing on Latour to emancipate STS scholars from the “science-against-policy” discourse we often find ourselves trapped in.

The four papers each contribute to different parts of understanding the liminal spaces in which STS scholars are experts in uncovering practices, frames and epistemologies that are often overlooked by more conservative disciplines. If society and policymakers want science and research to produce comfortable, easily digestible pills as remedies to modern ailments, it is our job as STS scholars to unpack these phenomena. Only then can we begin to make meaningful distinctions between true panacea, and gold plated promises made to pass through the system without bringing about any meaningful change.

References

- Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel (eds) (2018) *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 264 pages. ISBN: 9781478000181
- Simone Abram, Brit Ross Winthereik and Thomas Yarrow (eds) (2019) *Electrifying Anthropology: Exploring Electrical Practices and Infrastructures*. London-New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 214 pages. ISBN: 9781350102651