

Caring for Scholarship in Transition

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Abstract

This editorial briefly reflects on the idea of transition—a theme that cuts across energy systems, migration, and education, to name a few—and is likely familiar to many readers. In this issue, we focus on transition within the context of scholarly publishing; maintenance and repair studies; and experimental methods. We reflect on how the Issue’s thematic collection, “Maintenance & its Knowledges” guest edited by Jérôme Denis, Daniel Florentin, and David Pontille, raises ontological questions about the systems we continuously repair and maintain. We also introduce two original research articles, both of which discuss projects that

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used collaborative ethnography to disrupt normative modes of knowledge generation. Many of the articles in this issue engage the theme of socio-technical change, a classic STS topic that becomes a point of intervention, if at varying scales and using contrasting approaches. Collectively, the Issue can be read as a theory-method buffet that offers tools for working with and through transition.

Keywords

transitions; maintenance and repair studies; critical race theory; Feminist STS; open access; science and technology studies; scholarly publishing; interventions; collaborative ethnography

Knowing in Times of Change

Transition, the condition of moving from one state to another. There is a sense in which all we do as humans is transition, moving from one breath to the next, from an errand to an event, one emotion to another; from meeting to meeting, from student to professional, partner to guardian. Despite the frequency of transition in life, its elemental quality (Neale et al. 2022) one might say, it can be a state that is fraught and experienced with difficulty. What do they say about change?

Of course transition has been in minds, memes, and many policies of late. We need to transition energy systems and we need to create a world where transgender individuals and communities are not just protected, but thrive. Climate change and armed conflict are forcing migration on an unprecedented scale, and more expertise is emerging around how to support major life transitions—the right to die with dignity; remaking life after time in prison; beginning and ending schooling; and learning the body anew after medical procedures. These transition issues proliferate in today's scholarship; inequity and harm are often at play, and there is emphasis on creating knowledge and policies to make these shifts just—some at a global scale, others much more mundane. The emergence of several journals focused on transition—such as *Health Care Transitions*; *Renewable & Sustainable Energy Transitions*; *the Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention*; and *the Journal of Transition Medicine*—to say nothing of the countless special issues across disciplines, reflects a growing and collective sensibility that more attention needs to be given to how to change well.

As we wrap up our third year as an Editorial Collective (EC), we discuss in earnest the transition ahead: How do we *begin* to conclude our editorship so that the transition is well-designed? We find ourselves asking—very characteristically!—what infrastructure needs to be put into place, what information should be passed on, and how do we organize communication in the process (see for example, Okune et al. 2022 and Khandekar et al. 2021)? This also means we are looking at our publishing data and gathering lessons learned. There have been many. We are reflecting on the state-of-scholarly publishing, too, how it has changed in the last 10–15 years, and how it has changed in the last three since we began our editorship in 2020. Many will agree that in important ways, academic publishing is in need of great reform (International Science Council 2023); some go as far as to say it is a broken system that needs to be replaced ([Brembs et al., 2023](#)). And most understand by now (we hope . . .) that scholarly publishing—open and otherwise—has reproduced exclusions and inequities for historically marginalized scholars; and continues to do so ([Chen et al. 2019](#); [Vessuri et al. 2014](#)). Our EC knows this well, through experience and by witnessing problems in academic publishing from different vantage points. The act of pointing to and naming what is broken is often a starting

point for critical scholarship; knowing what should be maintained or repaired, however, often requires additional forms of expertise.

This is insight we've gained from the authors of the "Maintenance & its Knowledges" thematic collection, where the approach is to think of maintenance and repair as practices of continuity rather than exceptional moments of breakdown or crisis ([Denis, Florentin, Pontille 2023](#); [Denis & Pontille 2023](#)). In their "Introduction: to the collection, Denis, Flortin, and Pontille set up this distinction: Maintenance and repair can be framed,

not as an isolated and momentary part of a disruption, but as a continuous activity in an always broken world. In so doing, most of these studies considerably deflate the eventfulness of repair as an intervention dedicated to bringing back situations and technical objects in order ([Denis, Florentin, Pontille 2023](#)).

If we are already working within an already broken system, then maintenance and repair activities— it seems—are practices that continue to uphold cultures that don't work well in some way. This may not always be the most appropriate diagnosis, of course, but it's a new way of seeing these issues and one that could lend critical insight for imagining the work of transition. Thinking in terms of continuities, the articles are able to show us moments when the work of repair and maintenance becomes an opportunity to rethink and reconsider the system itself—such as in the case of transportation governance in Switzerland ([Röhl 2023](#)); the sealed biological samples that are used to produce forensic DNA profiles in France ([Rabeharisoa and Paterson 2023](#)); and the triage work that happens on university campuses each day ([Reiss-Sorokin 2023](#)).

In a sense, transitions are about continuity as much as they are about change. A shift of sorts is needed, or is coming as planned. Some transitions are a response to breakdown, crisis, or failures that are constructed in relation to what is reinforced as normal or successful. Other transitions are an anticipated and planned part of the system. Such is the case with transitioning a publication from one editor or editorial team to the next. Indeed, the model of running a peer-reviewed journal with a single editor has almost become a relic; it's a shift in academic labor easily observed by noting that social science and humanities journals today are more likely to be managed by teams than they were twenty years ago. Lots of factors contributed to this cultural shift in the organization and labor of scholarly publishing, which has taken place amidst a wider back-drop of sociotechnical transformations impacting higher education industries. Editorial transitions, however—like the one *ESTS* prepares for now—have been the containers that brought people together to determine what should be maintained; and to imagine how systems could be different.

Across the contexts described in this thematic collection, we see that maintenance and repair, whether a mundane gesture or the focal point of a larger project, requires expertise. In the Maintenance and Repair Studies (MRS) literature expertise has been described and theorized as different "modes of knowing," including embodied sensibilities ([Denis, Florentin, and Pontille, 2023](#)). The research featured in this Thematic Collection's articles, however, are about "knowledge in maintenance" as much as they are about the knowledge of maintenance ([ibid.](#)). This emphasis, Denis, Florentin, and Pontille write,

... in some configurations, knowledge generation is not only a moment in a maintenance operation, but a maintenance practice in and of itself—that conditions the maintainability of things and can consequently foreclose its perennality or even its existence (knowledge as maintenance). Since maintenance is

deployed to make things last, which goes through continual explorations of their state and transformations, maintenance assembles a set of practices which contribute to sustaining the very existence of things. Hence the cultivation of such continual existence goes with an endless and recursive generation of knowledge amongst the people in charge of these objects, technologies, and infrastructures. ([ibid.](#), 56)

What if transitions emphasized *knowledge in maintenance* as much as they emphasized what might be lost in change, or in innovations that would execute the transition for us? The MRS literature has advanced understanding of *how* we maintain and repair things, often by describing the nuts and bolts of everyday labors, for example. But in some cases, Denis, Florentin, and Pontille suggest, it's equally important to ask the ontological question: *what* are we maintaining?

Most readers, we imagine, will have at some point participated in conversations concerning the state of scholarly publishing; its evolving labor and economic dynamics perhaps, or maybe accessibility, language politics, and copyright. Some members of our Editorial Collective participated in conversations fifteen years ago that imagined open access journals as a way for professional communities to regain authority over scholarly publishing. Open access entered the discourse of professional societies as the committees we participated in considered how alternative publishing models could get us out of bad relations (as some saw it) with big presses like Wiley-Blackwell, Elsevier, and Sage (for ethical relations see [Liboiron 2021](#)). These discussions were about the nuts and bolts of publishing (print-on-demand, licenses, and fundraising), but also multimedia submissions, open peer review, and the value of circulating publicly our data sets. These conversations and the journals launched as a result were, of course, part of a much broader open access movement that emerged in the 1990s, and which continues to critique and resist the practices of commercial publishing today ([Moore 2019](#)).

Many of the concerns and frustrations first identified thirty years ago have only reached a higher pitch today, with mass resignation of journal editorial boards an increasingly common response to the corporate strategies adopted by big publishers ([Retraction Watch n.d.](#)). Innovations in scholarly publishing—from the explosion of open access journals and boutique services like online first, to editorial collectives, podcasts, and efforts to connect with broader publics—represent modest attempts to create change. Some wonder, with concern, how new modes of knowledge generation will count on the job market, and for promotion. Others consider how scholarly publishing culture contributes to the contentious knowledge politics of the day. Occasionally, a daring soul asks: Are peer-reviewed journals something we want to continue to maintain?

Stepping Forward in Collaboration, with Care

Certainly the articles published in this Issue compel us to say, “yes, more of this, please!” Both original research articles exemplify scholarship that works to transform inequities and power asymmetries in knowledge generation. In “Collaborative Ethnography and Matters of Care in Counterspaces,” Carrigan and colleagues leverage polyvocal narratives to identify epistemic injustice in STEM fields of higher education; this work happens through LATTICE (Launching Academics on the Tenure-Track: an Intentional Community in Engineering), a cross-race and interdisciplinary collaboration to advance equity in engineering. As the authors write, LATTICE is a project that reflects a trend towards “heterogeneous

collectives” that are making STS interventions inspired by critical race scholarship and feminist STS. It’s a thorough case study that demonstrates how communities can enact critical praxis, with care.

In “Algorithms in the Margins: Organized Community Resistance to Port Automation in the Los Angeles Harbor Area” Cruz and colleagues reframe the “future of work” in relation to historically marginalized communities around the Port of Los Angeles, who insist that transitions brought on by AI/ML will also involve the “the future of our communities.” Both researchers and policymakers have overlooked “working-class, racialized community perspectives on AI/ML,” argue Cruz and colleagues, and by extension, what such perspectives say about “the wider social relations surrounding technoscientific institutions, actors, and practices, including how these intersect with power and inequality” (2023, 35). What began as a study of AI/ML implementation became a study of community mobilization, which the authors found to be a more potent site for studying sociotechnical change.

Both articles document what participation in communities *in transition* can look like—whether through anti-oppression praxis in interdisciplinary research, or in public hearings that put unseen concerns and vulnerabilities on the table. They also show how to use empirical material to open up a discursive space in knowledge generation: Carrigan and colleagues describe how counter-spaces became an important way for thinking about and discussing both shared and distinct language practices used across STEM spaces (Carrigan et al. 2023), while Cruz and colleagues show how lay critique was mobilized to expand thinking about who and what may be impacted by the integration of automated straddle carriers into port operations. If we frame these articles as studies of communities *in transition*, we can see how the work of documentation that anchored these projects capture moments of collective query: what is to be maintained as we step into the future, and what must be done, differently?

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As we think about the future of *ESTS*—the transitions enacted in our editorship, as well as the ones that will inevitably come when the journal changes hands—we know situating this shift in relation to community is critical: Professional communities of copyeditors, managing editors, librarians, and designers; communities of undergraduate STS students who have done much of their learning through multimedia technologies; and of course, with the many communities of STS scholars that constitute the field today. How does the work of a scholarly journal today shape professional communities and their institutions; what interconnections, shifts, and new communities emerge from scholarly organizing; and what do we do when fractures, limits, and dependencies get exposed in the process of change-making?

We believe in the importance of collaboratively stewarding and maintaining such scholarly-owned critical spaces; learning about the practices and findings of others is often the very thing that inspires our own scholarship. Peer-reviewed journals are, for now, a critical space for learning about work that may be ground-breaking, that documents the lessons of failure, or challenges entrenched ways of thinking. Among the many take-aways gleaned from this issue is that documentation is a practice of knowledge maintenance, necessary in order to learn how to run something, later repair it, and then keep it running. Another take-away is that transitions happen in relation to community, a perspective that we are leading with as we step into our last year.

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