Response to Steve Hoffman's "The Responsibilities and Obligations of STS in a Moment of Post-Truth Demagoguery"

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Abstract

In this response to Steven Hoffman's "The Responsibilities and Obligations of STS in a Moment of Post-Truth Demagoguery," I insist on the importance of public knowledge, which requires that we distinguish between scientific and public facts. I differentiate between knowledge democracy and populism, as the former entails a refusal of hierarchical visions of the relation between science and politics. I discuss the problem of demarcation, and how the delineation between valid and invalid claims resurfaces as a practical and normative problem in today's technological societies.

Keywords

demarcation; knowledge technology; knowledge democracy; digital society; public facts

In his response to my article "Why we can't have our facts back," Steve Hoffman suggests that my real anxiety is that science and technology studies (STS) might be blamed for the rise of fake news, or "post-truth." This misunderstands my concern. My article addresses the concern that progressive intellectuals, including in STS, are not yet sufficiently equipped, methodologically and intellectually, to make the case for knowledge democracy in today's changing context, which is marked by the rise to prominence of right-wing anti-expert discourse. I argue that we need to actively challenge an influential response to the threats this discourse poses to public knowledge: computational systems for fact checking, and the normative vision of the public sphere inscribed into them. I criticize the public framings and methodologies of fact verification that recently have been put forward by big tech companies such as Facebook, which differ in important ways from fact checking as a social movement (Ananny 2018), and from quality journalism as found in the New York Times and practiced by newer organizations like the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. While the latter seek to raise the standard of public debate by providing audiences with data, materials, and insights that enable them to counter and articulate public claims, the former are focused on the de-legitimation of sources through the application of verificationist criteria. We need to evaluate and challenge this approach to public knowledge, and

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outline alternative perspectives if we are to advance the case for knowledge democracy in a digital age.

Hoffman proposes that STS people should study fact-checking services empirically. This is of course a great idea, and several scholars are already doing excellent work on fact checking: Lucas Graves (2018), whom I mention in my article, but also Chris Anderson (2018) and Mike Ananny (2018). The best of this work combines an empirical focus on practices and technologies of fact checking with an interest in methodology and the role of knowledge in democracies. To do this, the above scholars draw on STS, media studies, sociology, and democratic theory. The aim of my broader reflection on fact checking is to contribute to this work, by carving out a space for STS to contribute to the further development of fact-checking methodology. That is to say, "empirical attention" is certainly needed, but we also need to explicate alternative analytic frames for safeguarding the role of knowledge in digital public spheres. As the study of techno-scientific controversies has taught us, "public facts" are a special category of fact: where scientific facts are ideally stable, many of the empirical propositions that animate publics—from the measurement of social inequality to air pollution—are marked by unstable truth values and changing political charges. If we are to adequately account for phenomena like public facts, which are today also inflected by emerging digital media technologies, STS scholars should not route around issues of methodology by quasi-modestly limiting themselves to "description." As I outline in my paper, public facts place distinctive methodological requirements on fact checking, such as the importance of capturing changes in truth value, rather than prioritizing claims that are stable. It's our job to formulate these special requirements and to imagine their implementation.

Some of the philosophical and methodological differences between Hoffman and myself may stem from our understanding of demarcation. He notes that "We remain unconvinced by an updated correspondence theory of truth—the notion that the strength of facts is measured by the degree of overlap with a reality" and concludes from this that "STS is rooted, then, in its own form of populism. [..] We are the champions of 'knowledge democracy' and 'citizen scientists.'" (446) I see this differently. First, in my view participation and populism can't be equated. Populism is today closely associated with the re-instatement of the primacy of politics, and implies a hierarchical understanding of the relation between politics and science. (In this respect, by the way, it was entirely consistent for a Brexit campaign representative to declare that "the people have had enough of experts.") More often than not, populism today goes hand in hand with a re-assertion of the politics of sovereignty, and arguably implies a program of demarcation, between us and them, of its own (Latour 2005). By contrast, participation—arrangements that facilitate the active involvement of outsiders—operates across spheres—across politics, knowledge, culture, society. As such, it can be an active force not only for rendering issues public, but also for the re-negotiation of relations *between* politics and knowledge, which, I believe, cannot simply be settled by re-assertions of hierarchy within societal domains.

Second, Hoffman is right to note that many STS scholars remain unconvinced by updated correspondence theories. However, others are today constructively engaged in elaborating post-universalist understandings of knowledge, as in the experimental concepts of "inquiry" developed by Matthias Gross et al. (2005) and Martin Savransky (2016), and the creative

approaches to public knowledge outlined by design researchers like Chris Dantec and Carl DiSalvo (2013). These approaches do *not* give up on the question of loyalty to spheres beyond knowledge and politics: to nature, society and culture. In earlier work, I argued that Richard Rorty's thesis of "the end of demarcation" needs to be re-evaluated, in view of the resurgence of problems of relevance, bias, and deception in digital media spaces (Marres 2001, 2015). In the post-war period, the idea that legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims can be conclusively delineated on the basis of universally applicable criteria has been effectively challenged by philosophers, anthropologists, and historians, insofar as it is predicated on a mythical "view from nowhere," and the negation of the locatedness of inquiry. However, it does not follow from this that demarcation as a scientific, public, and societal problem looses its importance.

Today's search engines and other digital selection architectures arguably operate as demarcation machines, as they delineate between relevant and irrelevant sources. The proliferation of scandals and controversies about the privileging of established, discriminatory perspectives in these technological infrastructures clearly shows that demarcation continues to pose unavoidable practical and normative challenges in contemporary societies. In my article, I document the re-activation of the demarcationist project in computational initiatives of fact checking, which propose to verify online claims against a database of validated statements. I emphasize the connections between demarcation as a principle of 20th Century positivist philosophy of science and these computational architectures of fact checking proposed today: the latter risk to impose an un-reconstructed positivist vision of demarcation on public debate, in so doing re-activating the paternalistic model of science's public of the earlier 20th Century, where public expression is validated by recourse to a (techno-)epistemic authority located outside the public sphere. "Skepticism about correspondence," updated or not, then, in my view does not adequately sum up the epistemic position of STS scholars. Many in this field endorse a broader commitment in the social sciences and humanities to public knowledge, to the insight that the articulation of facts and public facts are related but distinctve "adventures in knowledge" (Stengers 2017). The process by which public facts are formulated, evaluated, and challenged is informed by scientific knowledge but cannot be reduced to it. The development of evaluative methodologies for public knowledge in our changing media spaces—methodologies which do not bracket the question of truth—is one of the exciting challenges ahead for our field, and will require exchanges with other fields: digital media studies, computer science, sociology, design, as well as philosophy.

This brings me to what I believe are the main *sociological* disagreements between Hoffman and myself. Hoffmann seems to think our problem today is primarily political. He writes "'post-truth politics,' then, is very far from what STS scholars describe as fact making. Instead, it is demagoguery" (449). I disagree. Today's demagoguery is technologically and methodologically enabled by behavioral media architectures and the behavioral and/or social analytics built into these architectures. This is perhaps not "science" in the narrow sense, but it is definitely knowledge technology. At the same time, and perhaps not coincidentally, today science is widely decried as "elitist" and "not on the side of people" in public discourse. Taken together, these developments may to an extent be understood in terms of attempts to force a shift

from a "liberal-democratic" model of the public sphere as a space of opinion formation on the basis of facts to a decisionist model of political participation where relations of "influence" between followers and leaders take precedence, and knowledge plays a marginal role. However, the main point of my article is different: techno-science is an active participant in the design and implementation of political architectures that enable the latter (decisionist) model. The link between science and liberalism is not self-evident, nor is it exclusive. It is therefore the relation between techno-science, media architectures, and public knowledge that requires further investigation.

For Hoffman, the protagonists in the contest that pitches knowledge (facts) against demagoguery (lies) are *scientists* and *politicians*. As he puts it: "scientists typically practice the former set of tactics [NM, methodological rigor]. Demagogues are really good at the latter [NM, deception]. What is at stake in our current moment is not so much scientific expertise, per se, but how these tactics of persuasion are being mobilized to grab power." (450). I don't think this assessment is wrong, but it is incomplete. Where is the public in Hoffman's diagnosis of our present? It seems to me that in his proposal for how STS is to analyze the relations between science and politics, "the public" doesn't really figure. To grasp the real drama unfolding, Hoffman seems to say, it is sufficient to analyze the tug of war between science and demagoguery. However, in focusing on the contributions of scientists and demagogues and their spokespersons, we risk reducing the public to a passive, receptive audience in the space where science meets politics, and this is exactly the intellectual and methodological tendency I am challenging in my article. I am tempted to say that Hoffman has given up on the ideal of knowledge democracy, in the sense that in his account publics cease to feature as a generative force in knowledge politics (Calvillo and Garnett, forthcoming). But my point will be different: knowledge democracy is still to be invented. Today's public spheres are marked not only by new knowledge technologies and power asymmetries, but also by the multiplication of subject positions and the proliferation of issues. Can we imagine ways of evaluating public knowledge that do not seek to counter these twin developments but show how they can inform and enrich public knowledge culture? If I'm not mistaken, Hoffman and I agree that the development of new analytical tools can help in this endeavor. Let's hold on to that.

Author Biography

Noortje Marres's work contributes to the interdisciplinary field of Science, Technology and Society (STS) and investigates issues at the intersection of innovation, everyday environments and public life: participation in technological societies; the role of mundane objects and devices in engagement; living experiments; the changing relations between social life and social science in a digital age. Noortje also works on research methodology, in particular issue mapping, and is interested in developing creative forms of inquiry between the social sciences, technology and the arts. Dr. Marres is currently Associate Professor at the Center for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick (UK), a Visiting Professor in the Centre for Science and Technology

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