

From Sideline to Frontline: STS in the Trump Era

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Abstract

The Trump presidency and its relationship to science and truth have prompted considerable reflection as well as significant action by STS scholars. Among those thinking, speaking, and acting are the authors of the articles in this thematic collection. This brief introduction summarizes the major strands in each of the articles, placing them in the context of current political trends.

Keywords

post-truth; post-fact; anti-science; Trump

Just over two years into the Trump presidency, the Eastern Sociological Society met in March 2019 in Boston. By that stage, Trump had made over 9,000 false or misleading statements—a figure that as of the fall of 2019 was over 13,000 (Kesler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2019)—and the inaugural March for Science—an event that had as a central mission promoting “evidence-based” policy—was approaching its second anniversary. Some STS scholars debated whether and how theoretical stances in the field might have contributed to the “post-fact” world (e.g. Sismondo 2017). Others were hard at work challenging the falsehood soaked environment built, in part, by the US president (see, Tirell et al. this collection), and still others were collaborating with activists, using data they’d collectively gathered to advance the interests of a mix of communities. Joseph Harris and Laurel Smith-Doerr organized two panels at ESS to allow STS scholars to take stock. Under the broad rubric “Science and Technology Studies in an Anti-Science Era” presenters and audience members discussed what is new about the current moment and what is continuous with previous periods and considered an array of initiatives by activists and STS scholars in response to the Trump administration’s policies and regulatory maneuvers. We are pleased that 5 of the 7 presenters at the ESS panels (and their collaborators) were able to transform their presentations into brief essays, and we are happy to share them here.

We begin with Michael Lynch’s “We have Never been Anti-Science: Reflections on Science Wars and Post-Truth.” Like many of the authors in this group of essays, Lynch contends that Trump’s approach to science policy is part of a longer trend. According to Lynch, the manufacture of scientific controversy by presidential administrations dates back at least to

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Ronald Reagan, and the approach of those seeking to challenge the scientific consensus across the period from Reagan to Trump isn't always, or simply, anti-science, but involves claims that proponents assert *are* scientific. Lynch moves on quickly from this discussion, spending most of his essay seeking to understand and challenge misunderstandings of "symmetry" in STS—mischaracterizations that have led some to suggest STS scholars are anti-science (and have thus contributed to the post-fact world we now inhabit). Lynch contends that symmetry is overgeneralized in some instances and suggests that anti- and pro-science positions do not map smoothly onto the political right and the left.

Our second contribution is by Anthony Hatch. In "DuBoisian Propaganda, Foucauldian Genealogy, and Antiracism in STS Research," Hatch, like Lynch, suggests that Trump's anti-science approach isn't new and importantly argues that "The vast majority of Black and Brown people are not surprised nor fooled by Donald Trump and the danger he represents to truth, to our lives, to our precious Earth." But Hatch devotes most of his essay to characterizing W.E.B. DuBois' position on truth, science, and race, reflecting in his conclusion on the value of DuBois' approach and suggesting that it may be more helpful than a Foucauldian perspective in supporting Black and Brown people in their struggles. He calls on STS scholars to "grapple with the politics of knowledge that define the science they make, the kinds of stories they tell about the world, and how the people impacted by that science understand the work they are so committed to producing."

The third piece in this set is by Scott Frickel and Christopher Rea. Using environmental disasters as a metaphor for the Trump administration—an anti-science disaster—Frickel and Rea argue for the importance of establishing baselines and documenting the extent of disaster in terms of change from those baselines. While the authors agree with many of those writing in this collection of essays that the Trump administration's policies around science are continuous with previous administrations, they also suggest establishing baselines highlights an important difference: while previous administrations sometimes "fabricated facts" and deceived the public, they "did not question the need for facts at all." Trump, in contrast to his Republican predecessors, doesn't "even bother to pay lip service to science...." If, however, Trump's rhetoric is anti-fact and anti-science, using baseline budget data suggests Trump's science funding cuts have not as been nearly as steep as the president urged. Similarly, although we should worry about Trump's science policy proposals, there is a gap between rhetoric and reality. As Frickel and Rea note, the redundancy built into the US environmental bureaucracy and the federal court system have slowed many of Trump's most disturbing science policy proposals.

In her contribution, Abby Kinchy considers what it means to do STS scholarship in the current moment. Kinchy sees one important role for STS scholars as documenting and analyzing counter-currents to the policies and practices currently promoted by the Trump administration and others. Kinchy and her collaborator have studied citizen engagement with environmental science. Here, Kinchy distinguishes between citizens taking on unpaid roles that should be filled by the regulatory state and situations where citizens are positioned to advance their collective interests. Kinchy also provides examples in which STS scholars can facilitate citizen initiatives and advise. STS scholars can, Kinchy notes, use our access to institutional resources to support

collaborative opportunities between activists and scholars and to aid activist challenges to organizational obstacles to advance their initiatives.

Finally, Chris Tirrell and his scholar and activist collaborators document the kind of collaborations that are possible between these two groups and how their collaboration can, in turn, enrich university-level courses. Tirrell and his co-authors describe the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI) and the work it has done to systematically monitor and document government agency websites and the evidentiary changes the Trump administration has made to websites, highlighting empirically questionable statements about climate change and pollution levels as well as government policy changes made by the Trump administration. This effort illustrates deeply collaborative and cooperative STS “critical making.” Involving students allows them to experience real-world knowledge making and political engagement, pushes them to struggle with collaboration and cooperation, and prompts them to contend with the boundary between description and interpretation.

Our five essays are capped off with reactions from the two organizers of the ESS panels, Laurel Smith-Doerr and Joseph Harris. Smith-Doerr helpfully points us to the way in which the theme of injustice winds its way throughout the essays in the collection. Harris provocatively points to matters that STS has not paid enough attention to and about which the current moment suggests we should take heed. He calls on STS to carefully examine movements consistent with the anti-fact moment in politics, like the anti-vaccination movement. Second, at a time when the authoritarian strain in the current presidential administration provokes many scholars to stress the importance of democracy—and STS scholars the importance of democratizing science—Harris suggests we should also consider how effective science develops in non-democratic contexts.

The contributions in this collection and the issues they raise can be seen as not only responses to the Trump administration and the so-called “post-truth” era, but, in their different ways, they also reflect an array of changes in scholarly production. Consistent with growing calls for scholarship that matters, many of the essays point to interventions that seek (or have had) influence well beyond the walls of the university. One piece brings together scholarship, practice, and education, an integration analysts and leaders are increasingly calling for, and each is accessible in terms of writing quality and because *ESTS* has no paywall around its content. For those committed to equity and to rigorous knowledge-based policy-making, there is little about the current era that is heartening, but it is good to know that there is work like that of the contributors to this collection and those working in traditions like theirs across the globe that is making, doing and fully engaged in imagining and creating a different world.

Author Biography

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