Vienna STS Talks

Ontological Overflows and the Politics of Absence: Algorithms and Modellers at the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention

Francis Lee
Chalmers University, Sweden

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This paper suggests that STS needs to start attending to what I dub ontological overflows. My argument is that the methodological principle of "follow the actors" has led to STS analyses taking over the matters of concern of our interlocutors. Our informants' concerns and objects, becoming our concerns and objects.

I argue that the consequence of the methodological dictum to "follow the actors" is that we have taken for granted which objects should be attended to, cared for, and analyzed. Thus, our theories and methods have constituted a particular blindness to those objects that our informants do not care for—the objects at the edges of the network, the smooth rhizomatic spaces, the blank figures, the undiscovered continents, the plasma. The paper thus joins in the ongoing discussion about otherness, perspectivalism, and ontological politics, and asks how STS can attend to the making of the absent, weak, and invisible. What would happen if we start paying attention to these ontological overflows in practice?
To demonstrate the usefulness of this analytical tactic the paper attends to the assembling of the absence of a pandemic at the European Disease Control and Prevention. By tracing how multiple absences are produced, the paper shows the usefulness of caring for the othered objects, of following the making of alterity and otherness. The argument is that the tracing of ontological overflows opens up for understanding how tangential objects are assembled, and consequently for tracing how absence, alterity, and otherness is made in practice.

Francis Lee is an associate professor and researcher at Chalmers University, Sweden, as part of the Division of Science, Technology, and Society. His primary research interest is focused on social and cultural aspects of digitalization and knowledge production. His work draws on science and technology studies, sociology, media studies, anthropology, history of science, and cultural studies. His ongoing research projects include `AI: A New Scientific Revolution? Dilemmas, Debates, & Challenge´, `The Rials of infodedemiology for the detection of disease outbreaks´, and `Trials of Value: an investigation of research design in biomedical experiment.

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