
Preface

The digitalSTS Community

The contributions to this volume are the outcome of a five-year community-building endeavor under the title *digitalSTS*: an effort to theorize the *next* generation of STS encounters with digital artifacts, environments, and interactions. These published contributors are only a small selection of all those participants who—across multiple conference panels, workshops, and online submissions and reviews—helped to produce an emerging understanding of digital studies rooted in the fields and commitments that constitute science and technology studies (STS). This edited collection is a product of that emergent, experimental, and participant-driven process. These events deserve an introduction as they shaped the voices in this collection and beyond.

digitalSTS got its start at the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) meeting in Cleveland in the fall of 2011 when over 80 people gathered for a participant-driven conversation about the challenges that digital tools, practices, and platforms posed for theory and practice, for the career trajectories of scholars identifying with digital scholarship, and for communicating our findings to STS and beyond. Eight panelists, ranging from junior to senior scholars and drawn from anthropology, history, communication, sociology, STS, and other interdisciplinary fields, issued brief provocations to a packed room; two hours of lively discussion followed. Among the many inspiring comments from panelists were those of anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, who exhorted the assembled STS scholars in the audience not to cede public discourse on digital topics to media pundits, where revolutionary rhetoric would dominate the subject. This prompt and the remarkable energy and vivacity in the room inspired us to turn a one-time event into the platform for a broader discussion, to open avenues for addressing “the digital” within STS, and to serve as a springboard to push the conversation forward.

Over the subsequent five years we convened four workshops, deployed an online platform, hosted events at 4S meetings and elsewhere, and set about building a community for scholarship on digital topics in STS. At 4S in Copenhagen in 2012, 40 workshop participants convened to specify the challenges that digital studies and scholarship posed to STS. This discussion was the source of the idea for a published “fieldguide” of cases, tools, and born-digital projects. Realizing that “making and doing” needed further elaboration within STS, co-editors Laura Forlano and Yanni Loukissas took the lead organizing a three-day follow-up workshop at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in 2013. This hands-on meeting gathered STS scholars and makers (broadly construed) to explore the field’s specific intersections with design and to more strongly theorize what might set STS making apart from other forms of DIY or digital intellectual endeavors. Later, as projects began to crystallize and develop, we established an online open platform for

peer-to-peer discussion of abstracts and papers, and workshopped precirculated drafts in person. Many of these meetings were sponsored by the Community for Sociotechnical Systems Researchers (CSST—www.sociotech.net), by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Office of Cyberinfrastructure, and by the NSF Science, Technology and Society program, with additional event sponsorship from the Sloan Foundation and Microsoft Research.

We embraced the concept of open scholarship and digital publishing from the outset, for instance by deploying practices from collaborative peer production and online communities. The first round of review, editing, and feedback for this volume was conducted on a platform (adapted from the alt.CHI community of human-computer interaction researchers) that allowed anyone to register, submit a paper, and review a colleague's work. Those whose interest was piqued by an article posted reviews, cross-talk among reviewers was encouraged, and neither authors nor reviewers were blinded. This fostered a collaborative reviewing environment as authors sought to help each other, point to key references or theories, and offer constructive critiques in preparation for the traditional blind review process conducted by Princeton University Press.

As the result of considerable bottom-up work, this volume stands as an achievement of many complementary community-building aims. We sought to bring together those scholars with one foot in STS and the other in information technology fields to encourage more cross-talk and to incorporate lessons learned from programming, design, and development into STS scholarship and practice. We also hoped to open a space for STS scholars studying digital topics to develop their contributions, and for those in relevant neighboring fields to identify with and contribute to STS scholarship through the events and engagements of *digitalSTS*. We purposefully integrated opportunities for junior academics to work together and alongside mid- and senior-career scholars in an effort to elaborate and develop relevant conceptual vocabulary and themes in the STS register.

Community building can easily produce exclusions instead of inclusions, or homogeneity instead of heterogeneity. Our continued interest in developing the diversity of participation sets this volume apart. Our goal was not to definitively theorize “the digital” or to identify an overarching perspective on digital work that all must share. Instead, the shape and scope of the topic were defined by the self-selected community, with the editorial board serving as organizers and shepherds along the way. Hence, it was conversations among community members that actively shaped the volume and its approach from the outset, with topics emerging from among the many active and interactive discussions. It is our hope that this will ensure a volume with broad scope and reach across STS and its sister disciplines.

Fortunately, digital scholarship no longer seems such a marginal topic in STS as it did in 2011. Perhaps this reflects a changing public consciousness, as data, algorithms, infrastructure, and a host of other digital objects have taken on a heightened relevance in the press and in politics. It may also reflect a changing membership in STS, as those who have grown up with devices always in hand or in pocket seek to reflect that ubiquity in their scholarly work. The question of whether or not “digitalSTS” marked something truly unique haunted our discussions from the very first. However, at our final workshop, held in advance of the 2015 4S meeting in Denver, Matt Ratto noted that perhaps the term “digital” “marked time” for this project, capturing a sensibility toward this emerging scholarship between 2011

and 2016. The contributions to this volume are simply “doing STS,” albeit with digital subject matter, tools, and products. If not carving out a new intellectual domain, then, the moniker of digitalSTS serves instead as a rallying call to push our field forward, to seize the public conversation surrounding “the digital revolution,” to engage with policy and design practice, and to knit together a robust, thoughtful community of scholars dedicated to both the core principles and the continued future of STS in the world.