STS 502/PHIL 560 Seminar in STS

Term 2

Alan Richardson (and Guests)

Topic: Public Engagement with Science: Communication, Conation, Action

Among the crucial topics of study in STS and of concern in society writ large is the question of what an informed citizen should know about science and how should they use it to guide their own action and coordinate their action with others.  This course will concentrate to two elements of these complex questions: the first is communication of esoteric knowledge to a variety of publics and the second is the place of a rich set of conative concepts in a proper of understanding of the deployment of knowledge in practical reasoning.  After a brief consideration of some classic answers to the question of what the citizen should understand about science (by Weber, Conant, Jasanoff, and others), we will acquire conceptual resources from STS, philosophy, and rhetoric to understand speech situations and speech acts (Austin, Searle, Habermas, Douglas, Latour, Gross, Leach, Collins, and others) to ask for any answer we wish to give how publics engaging communicatively with science and scientists aid that answer.  Then we shall take up the question of whether we can go beyond “going beyond the value-free ideal” to have a richer set of conative concepts to think with in thinking about “science for action”—can we not better distinguish analytically between values and interests, for example.  Here we shall think about classical notions such as “scientific ethos” as theorized by Merton, re-theorized by Barnes and Dolby, alternatively considered in rhetoric of science, and how it interacts with explicit or implicit virtue epistemology of science in literatures such as those on epistemic justice (Fricker, Grasswick, Catala, and others) and social accounts of objectivity (Harding, Scheman, Tallbear, Wylie, and others). I am particularly interested right now in the new work by Stephen John on “wishful speaking” and how it might help us understand the relations between ideology and science (since his proleptic wishful speaking seems close kin to ideologically-driven science).  We shall use examples from current public engagement issues such as climate science, anti-vaxx movements, pandemic communication, etc.  We will also, of course, use the standard methods of reflexivity in STS to ask what citizens should know about STS and how they could come to know it—i.e. what our own obligations to society are.  Both theoretical and applied final projects are encouraged