

# ANNUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY FOR SOCIAL STUDIES OF SCIENCE 2017

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
CONFERENCE REPORT



Conference Badge and Program

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Still fighting a 6-hour jetlag, I am back in Vienna and settling into work. I just came back from Boston, Massachusetts, where I attended the [Annual Meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science](#). This society, short 4S, is an international non-profit association founded in 1975. It aims to foster the collaboration between researchers in the field of STS, which stands for "Science and Technology Studies" (aka Science, Technology and Society). As [the Harvard STS program homepage says](#), this 'relatively new field of academia seeks to promote cross-disciplinary integration, civic engagement, and critical thinking'. Furthermore, it tries to 'overcome the divisions between the two cultures of humanities and natural sciences'.

Back home, explaining to my friends and family what STS is turned out to be more difficult than imagined. One specific example, which – in my opinion – sums up the idea behind STS, proved to be very helpful: the studies undertaken by [Mark Vardy](#).

For his studies, Vardy went to the [National Snow and Ice Data Center \(NSIDC\)](#) in Boulder, Colorado where he spent several weeks. Different to the NSIDC scientists, he did not observe the changing sea ice, but rather the scientists themselves. Through those insights gained during this fieldwork he then analysed how the work undertaken by the NSIDC [influenced the societal conception and political actions concerning climate change](#).

Mark Vardy is surely not the only one into STS. More than 1.500 people coming from over 15 different fields of expertise as well as the almost 100 different events *per day* made this meeting a buzzing place of ideas, theories and controversies. The topics ranged from biomedicine and -technology, gender, sexuality and feminism, science communication and citizen science, engineering and infrastructure to computing and media technology.



Government Center, Boston

Panels focusing on climate change, public participation in science and working in urban environments attracted me the most. Amanda Giang from M.I.T., e.g. talked on '[Engaging, Empowering, Enacting Community in Environmental Health Research](#)'; Noriko Hara from Indiana University on '[Scientists' Use of Reddit as Science Communication](#)'. Also Enric Senabre Hidalgo's (Open University of Catalonia) talk on '[Design Thinking for the Ideation of Collaborative Research Processes](#)' and the panel '[Frontiers of Climate Change and Extinction: Rendering Worlds Familiar and Strange](#)', chaired by Annette Blickford from York University, were of great interest to me.

Panels on citizen science and public participation were scheduled on two consecutive days. My supervisor, [Prof. Iris Eisenberger](#) from the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna chaired two of them together with [Melanie Dulong de Rosnay](#), ISCC CNRS Paris Sorbonne and [Shun-Ling Chen](#), Institutum Iurisprudentiae, Academia Sinica. They focused on '[Citizen Science in Politics and Practices](#)' and invited STS scholars, historians of science and techno-legal researchers to propose their case studies.

The variety of those case studies could not have been greater. There were talks on identifying mushrooms in the forests of [Norway](#) and the [San Francisco Bay Area](#). Others focused on learning outcomes gained through [community wireless networks](#) in Greece, France and Germany. Some studies were undertaken while [climbing the Peruvian Andes](#), monitoring black carbon. And, on a more artistic level, a project [visualising thermal water pollution](#) in exposed communities.



Downtown Crossing Station, Boston



Downtown, Boston

Despite the variety of projects and different research approaches one topic remained crucial to every discussion: the scientific framing of citizen science. A regular point of criticism is the seeming lack of scientific legitimacy. Citizen science projects should take this concern seriously. Not only because of reputational issues, but also to improve self-reflection within the citizen science community.

Another often issued concern was that the term 'citizen science' was merely used to improve funding chances. Indeed, the recent upsurge of citizen science projects might be tracked down to this phenomenon in some parts at least.

Apart from citizen science and climate change, I tried to become acquainted with new topics. For example through visiting [a panel trying to establish a connection](#) between the practice of [wire bending in Trinidad and Tobago](#), [big wave surfing](#) and [hackathons](#) organized by public education. One of my favourites was the [enthusiastic explanation of secret USSR trade policies](#), which were so secret that they were never applied.



Scientific conferences are a great place to meet new people. Scholars and students from all over the world flocked to Boston to exchange ideas, thoughts and concerns. Unfortunately, the travel ban imposed by the U.S. president has hindered some of the participants from contributing to the conference. The Trump administration and its possible impact on scientific research were therefore a recurring subject throughout the meeting.

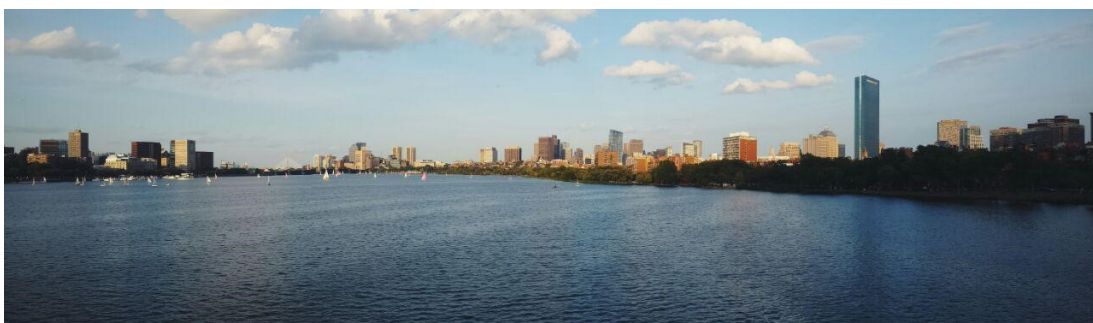
The opening [Presidential Plenary](#) for example was titled 'Interrogating 'the Threat''. 'The Threat' was the seemingly looming apocalypse, not only impersonated

by Mr. Trump, but also by nuclear conflicts and climate change. Viewing the Trump administration as 'the Threat' and referring to it as 'occupation' caused [Kim TallBear](#) to share her opinion from the indigenous point of view. She explained that indigenous people have been living in a post-apocalyptic world since the time settlers arrived. Recent political developments were only a sign of the ongoing of their post-apocalyptic lives. Her intense, yet understandably angry speech gained the most twitter-traffic via the [#4s2017](#) hashtag that evening.

Not only Kim TallBear, rather the whole conference was accompanied by various tweets. Apart from intense tweeting, caffeine intake dictated the schedule. Though one might think that tweeting and sipping coffee would use up break time, books posed the true main attraction. Propped up in the foyer, they made everyone stop, scroll and buy them. I even overheard some people being seriously concerned about exceeding their baggage allowance.



Rowes Wharf, Boston



View on Boston over Charles River, Cambridge

The conference was an exciting experience. I learned about new theories, new opinions, new techniques and met funny and intelligent people. I had conversations with international researchers and broadened my view of science and technology studies. Especially as my own scientific 'upbringing' was mainly based on natural science and technology, the integration of social sciences into these fields was a highly interesting experience.

After 4 days of panels, workshops and books (and coffee), I was nevertheless glad to spend some off-days in the Boston area. There are still many thoughts and ideas swirling around my head, trying to find a way into future research. I am very grateful to BOKU University for giving me the opportunity to participate in this extraordinary meeting.



Reflection Pool, Boston