

We Don't Need Another Deficit Model, This Time For STS

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In January 2017, I sent a longish and self-introductory email to Joanna Radin after reading her essay – “Where Nothing Can Possibly Go ‘Worng’” – on the HBO show *Westworld*, which was published in the *New Inquiry*.² I was struck by this essay as it was written by an STS scholar, and articulating the oeuvre of a popular science writer (Michael Crichton) with poignant and accessible STS ideas for a wider audience. In my email, I asked Radin’s (and the magazine editorial’s) permission to translate this essay into Turkish to be published in an arts and culture magazine *Bant Mag.*, based in Kadıköy, Istanbul. I thought that her STS critique of the show and Crichton’s technoscientific imagery would be well received by a particular Turkish readership interested in sci-fi stories, contemporary art and popular culture. Radin got back to me swiftly including an encouraging and excited message saying “I heard from my editor and she has no reservations, so let’s go for it!” This is how my journey of innovating STS in Turkey begun. Lo and behold I have been preparing a series of STS-themed texts in different formats, including translations, essays, interviews, for *Bant Mag.* since February 2017.³

One might question and get curious about the innovation aspect of this small-scale popular publishing endeavor flourishing out of a local arts and culture magazine in Istanbul. And it is a valid question for sure. In that regard, I need to provide some more contextual information.

I have been following *Bant Mag.* since it got started to be published in September 2004, that year corresponds to my sophomore year in college studying Molecular Biology and Genetics. This magazine was used to be sold at the newspaper kiosk on campus and I was reading it every now and then was a matter of excitement for sure. As years followed, I had the chance to meet and get to know some of the people who have been actively involved in assembling this magazine via friends and friends of friends (Ekin Sanaç, Hakan Dedeoğlu, Aylin Güngör, Cem Kayıran, just to name a few). Ah, that “hip” Kadıköy social scene! In addition to her editorial jobs for a couple of local magazines (including *Bant Mag.*), Ekin used to run this tiny place called *Kutu Kafe* (“kutu”

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² Joanna Radin, “Where Nothing Can Possibly Go ‘Worng’”, *The New Inquiry*, 12 December 2016, online access via: <https://thenewinquiry.com/where-nothing-can-possibly-go-worng/>

³ <https://bantmag.com>

meaning box in English) located by the building next to where I lived back then and Hakan and Aylin were regulars of *Kutu*. Such social scene has been full of freelance, precarious and creative labor situated in post-2000s Istanbul. And I had to chance to witness how this magazine that I felt aspired by since my early college years was put together by a small group of people's daily efforts. Community-based publication in action! Then I got into graduate school, moved to Ithaca, New York but my social ties with *Bant Mag.* (e.g., following the magazine's online website from overseas) sustained even if in sort of an on and off fashion. Of course, my irregular encounters with friends "back home" included a bunch of conversations in middle of which I would feel the need to explain what this specific graduate field called "Science and Technology Studies" was/is. Let's say that conversation still goes on.

STS is known to be a transdisciplinary field of study but most of the interesting work that comes out of it is bounded by the academia. Other than sparse journalistic articles and profile pieces that you would come across to – such as the ones published in *New York Times*, *New Yorker* and *Guardian* recently about Bruno Latour⁴, Emily Martin⁵ and Donna Haraway⁶ this past year – many non-academic audiences are not familiar with looking and engaging with their world through STS lenses and practices. And this situation gets direr in places like Turkey where STS is still struggling to be recognized even by the various echelons of academia, does not get recognized as a distinct academic discipline by its higher education governance mechanisms and many of its canonical (or provocative) texts have not been widely translated into Turkish. In that regard, the STS-themed translations, essays and interviews I published in *Bant Mag.* could be considered as an attempt to introduce some of this wonderfully generative field of study's features to wider audiences. Despite the fact that *Bant Mag.* is known to be a local publication rooted in a particular district in Istanbul, its website and active use of social media platforms have been effective in terms of disseminating the writings produced under its umbrella. Not that numbers matter that much after some point in this commercialized and easily manipulated digital

⁴ Ava Kofman, "Bruno Latour, The Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science", *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 2018, online access via: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>

⁵ Ceridwen Dovey, "An Anthropologist Investigates How We Think About How We Think", *The New Yorker*, 29 December 2018, online access via: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/an-anthropologist-investigates-how-we-think-about-how-we-think>

⁶ Moira Weigel, "Feminist Cyborg Scholar Donna Haraway: 'The disorder of our era isn't necessary'", *The Guardian*, 20 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/donna-haraway-interview-cyborg-manifesto-post-truth>

subscription craze we live in but it's worth noting that *Bant Mag.* has 79k followers on Instagram, 166k followers on Twitter, many of these subscribers living outside Kadikoy, Istanbul.

Here is an overview of some of the writings I have prepared for Bant Mag. so far and how I envision each one of them to be related to a particular set of STS-themes or ideas:

[Translation of Joanna Radin's essay](#)⁷ on Westworld and Michael Crichton was a thought-provoking take on human-computer interactions and how certain notions of error, bug and malfunction about artificial intelligence reflect a group of human norms and values' dominance over others.

[Interview with the wonderful Sophia Roosth](#)⁸ spanned a bunch of STS topics including the global governance of food security, differential echoes of the Green Revolution in contemporary societies depending on which hemisphere one is situated in, Cold War history and so on.

[Essay I wrote about Richard Mosse's photography exhibition in New York City](#)⁹ was my attempt to reflect on how a particular technological artefact (a night vision, ultra-sensitive camera mostly used in war zones) was repurposed for making a statement about an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

[Interview with Joseph Dumit](#)¹⁰ (whose writings have been profoundly influential on my graduate studies) was a recap on the history of cyborg studies in STS, its political relevance and Dumit's recent scholarship and teaching at UC Davis campus.

[Interview with Halil Altindere and the curatorial art collective Das Art Project](#)¹¹ was based on their collaborative exhibition in Istanbul named Welcome to Homeland. Our conversation delved into socio-technical imaginaries coming out of Syria and Turkey, Muhammad Faris' life story. Faris is known to be the first Syrian and second Arab who went to space but also a refugee who spent time in Istanbul following the civil conflict that have irrupted in his home country.

⁷ <http://www.bantmag.com/magazine/issue/post/55/880>

⁸ <http://www.bantmag.com/magazine/issue/post/56/922>

⁹ <http://www.bantmag.com/magazine/issue/post/57/945>

¹⁰ <http://www.bantmag.com/magazine/issue/post/59/979>

¹¹ <http://www.bantmag.com/magazine/issue/post/60/997>

[Interview with the documentary filmmaker and marine biologist Mert Gökalp](#)¹² on his documentary *Lüfer – Boğazın Prensi* (Bluefish – Prince of Bosphorus) which was the later product of an engaging conversation followed by a public screening of the film. In this interview, one could see how following the life of a single fish species could unravel a series of entanglements between political economy of fishing, environmental movements and ecological crises in Eastern Mediterranean.

It is important to note that the publications I introduce above are fragments of a larger, expanding STS endeavor whose tentacles aim to reach out, address, provoke, collaborate or trouble multiple social and professional groups situated in both within and outside academia in places like Turkey but not exclusively. Maybe one should not get caught up with the STS label in the first place but treat it as a plane of intellectual production where current (and potential) allies think and act together and get realigned in new configurations, looking towards common futures, better ones.

My initial aim for producing STS-themed contents for *Bant Mag.* was not to perform and disseminate STS to wider audiences for the sake of making a niche but to make transdisciplinary academic field more publicly visible and sound more legitimate than it does. Introducing STS scholars, works and concepts to non-academic readership (including general readers, citizens, non-citizens, consumers, policy-makers, regulators, pundits and so on) should not be taken up as part of some Public Understanding of Science framework. We don't need another deficit model for science and technology, this time implying some sort of deficiency for critical thinking regarding these domains. Rather, we'd better try to come up with new ways of inviting people to think and act differently by showing them interesting and engaged scholarship, art, knowledge making and technology developing practices so that they can relate to such practices, revisit some of their assumptions and habits, and show the will to live in a world that does not put science and technology on a set of pedestals but treat them as things not always ready-to-use but to engage with, modify and share from hand to hand.

In order to come closer (but probably never arrive at) to such aims, we need to be more creative and reflexive about what it means to do “STSy” work, at what points should we care about the

¹² <https://bantmag.com/magazine/issue/post/61/1033>

“STSiness” of things (based on the current definitions of STS which are rooted mostly in Northern Hemisphere histories) and seek for new ways to make fragments of “STSy” works that exist in various places and communities speak to, affect and co-shape each other in all bunch of generative ways, and encourage others to produce their own fragments.