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REVIEW / RECENZJA

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In a time of polycrises, the complexities that surround our (dis)engagement with scientific discourses are persistent and salient. While science and politics have long been intertwined, the influence of the latter in contemporary times is both notable and concerning. No longer is the conversation primarily about scientific data being co-opted by governments or private corporations for their own ends. Rather, the rhetoric of science itself is being questioned as useful, relevant and logical, despite its grounding in globally accepted scientific methods, peer-reviewed data sets and/or widely accepted conclusions. While the field of rhetorical scholarship has always been equipped with the tools, motivation and strategies to question what we know, it is also capable of peeling back the epistemological approaches that lead us to accept some knowledge as "fact" and other knowledge as "fake news". However, as recent years have revealed, this dichotomy has proven trickier to account for (and engage in dialogue about) as political extremism has seeped into mainstream conversations. It is a time for us, as academics, to revisit the ways in which our multiple communities (not just our expert communities) are being affected by this new reality. Pamela Pietrucci and Leah Ceccarelli have taken up this call in their new edited volume, *Scientists, Politics, and the Rhetoric of Public Controversy* (2025, Palgrave Macmillan), and have produced an insightful and motivational collection of rhetorical scholarship that invites us all to reconsider the role of science, scientists and rhetoric in public discourse that seeks to discredit scientific expertise.

The volume's case studies span five countries across Europe and North America and provide a broad insight into the ways in which scientists themselves can (or should) become civic agents, community advocates and/or political lobbyists while also highlighting the role of rhetorical scholarship in responding to crises

and adhering to a "duty of care" in the way it analyses the rhetoric of science. The authors propose that rhetoricians, like scientists, have a responsibility to engage with and advocate for a healthy civic life that creates space for diverse participants and enacts a shared responsibility to advance the commitments of the humanities. By revealing how misinformation or disinformation attacks on knowledge directly interfere with political agendas, rhetorical scholars can shine a light on the moments that matter. However, as some of the chapters reveal, shining a light is easier than expecting blanket advocacy or resistance to institutional exertions of power, as such participation can be devastating for those who do so without the guarantees or protections of a free society. Thus, the authors' commitment to "improving the public rhetoric of science" in ways that embrace a "responsibility to humanity" is inspiring but perhaps idealistic at times.

Balancing historical approaches and contemporary challenges

The collection of essays expertly weaves a historical approach to making sense of this tumultuous contemporary discourse engaged by various types of scientist-citizens, activists and pseudo-scientific actors with contemporary commentary on the unique challenges and potential impacts that rhetorical scholarship can make. Utilising broad conceptions of citizenship in relation to protest and advocacy while recognising the dynamic relationship between crisis and care further allows the volume to uniquely contribute to complex discussions about public engagement and science activism—a term previously unnecessary in a world of unquestioned acceptance of "objective scientific expertise". While a critical cultural approach to analysis and criticism, which appears less prominently in this collection, would certainly further interrogate the roots of science as unquestionable ontological knowledge, the included essays clearly introduce diverse challenges that emerge when public engagement in science communication results in controversy. Additionally, the case studies themselves provide important insights into the (im)possibilities for scientist-citizens across a variety of historical moments, organisational contexts, geographical locations and political situations. This allows a wide range of readers to find the collection useful, relevant and potentially inspiring as they navigate the challenges related to science communication, politics, public engagement, controversy, advocacy/resistance and their emergent rhetorics.

Agency and response

Organized into two sections—Scientist Citizens and Engagement with Science—the volume offers a variety of historical and contemporary approaches to analysing a broad collection of rhetorics of science and scientific expertise/activism examples. The result is a clear call to (re)consider the varied ways in which science communication impacts our everyday lives. These approaches to examining these rhetorics allow us to reconsider not only what is being communicated but also how science and scientists have shifted their relationship to one another.

The leading chapters in both sections begin by using historical concepts to analyse contemporary moments. Ceccarelli examines resistance within the scientific community by tracing the rhetorical history of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) in the United States as an example of political agency as early as 1968, when they called for a coordinated walkout in protest of the "misuse" and "exploitation" of "scientific and technological knowledge" (p. 19). Through a close reading of the UCS foundational document, Ceccarelli exposes familiar logics, discourses and resistance to attempts to discredit and dislodge the scientist-citizen from influencing what we deem to be "acceptable forms of scientific dissent" (p. 35). Similarly, Kjeldsen, Just, and Mølster utilise the ancient Aristotelian concept of *ethos* to make sense of "the process of the public circulation of the messages and images of public health experts" (pp. 147-48). By examining the ways in which an "ethos of expertise" appeared across Facebook "fan" posts about health experts in Scandinavia during the global COVID-19 pandemic, the authors propose extending the original concept of *ethos* to account for what they term "*produsedethos* (spelt with an 's')" (p. 148) in online negotiations of expertise in scientific health discourse.

The next chapter in each section utilises contemporary approaches to rhetorical analysis while relying on the historical tropes of rhetorical scholarship to guide them. For example, Syfert examines the more recent evolution of the March for Science website as grounded in the shared belief that "publicly communicated science [i]s a pillar of human freedom and prosperity" (p. 48) while simultaneously grappling with the difficulties of including both experts and non-experts equally in efforts to advocate for evidence-based decision-making at the political and policy level. Focused on a similar topic, Olsen moves this claim further to interrogate the effects of more extreme and recent activist groups such as the Scientist Rebellion Movement and Extinction Rebellion (p. 74). By analysing the argumentation and rhetorical figures involved in scientific commentary, Olsen focuses on the ramifications of proposing a moratorium on all climate research as a way to interrupt

the persistent misuse and/or inaction as well as promoting "survival ecology" as a potential way forward in spite of historically underutilised research on climate science.

Additional chapters in each section continue the theme of blending ancient concepts and contemporary texts. Mehlenbacher and Mehlenbacher propose reconsidering the ancient Greek and Roman notions of *vituperations*, *invectives*, and *censures* as helpful in assessing the attribution of blame directed at public health officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining "who is *blameworthy* in service of more robust and effective public discourse around complex scientific, technical and medical subjects" (p. 185), the authors demonstrate how expertise is always a combination of "specialised and moral knowledge" but not always recognised or valued concurrently. Similarly, Bloomfield engages in a timely examination of the infiltration of hyper-masculinity into scientific discourse by also using *ethos* (this time, in addition to *eunoia*) as a way to discuss (and interrupt) the contributions of non-trained members of the public who seek to influence how scientific knowledge is distributed via non-scientific platforms.

While the chapters thus far focus primarily on details that themselves are not disputed, two chapters tackle the politicisation of scientific agency itself as part of their foci. In the first section, Mathison reflects that "Science has transformed as government and industry have conjoined with it to create a robust force within society with impacts greater than scientists can control" (p. 118). The chapter compellingly examines recognisable "scientist advocates" via their own records and by looking at more critical (and sometimes overlooked) elements like "textual silences" in order to point out the powerful impact of that which is withheld. By looking for such gaps or "silences", Mathison invites us to remember that locating moments of (self-)censorship is often an insightful way to account for the impacts and influences of governmental, organisational and/or societal control. In the second section, Coleman's challenge of data visualisations as a "value free" form of communicating scientific knowledge reminds us that rhetorical influence is not solely found, exercised through articulations. Coleman proposes (re)considering the role of "pausing" and "studying" as morally-imbued actions of the virtuous person, connecting micro-actions of interaction to larger ideologically-inspired strategies like the "*epistemological filibuster*," which extends accessibility of expert rhetorical knowledge to non-rhetorical scholars given that scientists can, for example, "indicate that they do not yet have all of the information". Coleman thoughtfully points out that such a shift can, in turn, impact broader publics by inviting them to pause their own decision-making to wait to learn more. The resulting call to attend to "moral purpose" in scientific discourse is a testament to how humanistic

principles divorced from scientific knowledge creation produce oversimplified and under-examined understandings of science.

The final chapter in each section provides thoughtful reflections on the aims and scope of examining scientific controversies through the lens of rhetorical scholarship. Pietrucci shares an interview with leading Italian virologist and public health advocate, Roberto Burioni, and Goodnight proposes expanding the focus of rhetorical analysis to be more inclusive of, attentive to the diversity of our texts. By showcasing Burioni's approach to advocating for scientific literacy and countering misinformation related to vaccine science, Pietrucci invites readers to notice, and perhaps adopt, Burioni's "rhetorical self-awareness" (p. 127).

In contrast, Goodnight's focus on science and activism entails highlighting the Dena'ina tribe indigenous to Alaska (USA) as a means of demonstrating the importance of situating rhetorical analyses within broader subject histories and specific contextual details. While addressing contemporary tensions emergent in scientific discourses between the Anthropocene and the Holocene, as well as between local and global forces, the expert lens of the rhetorical scholar remains ever present. Goodnight's conclusion that inquires into "whether the Cook Inuit model of community science could be instructive for twenty-first-century activism" by "extending to the performance of global networks of advocacy…that broaden, enliven, and make the aims and practices of contemporary earth science more inclusive" (p. 257) is commendable.

However, it is Burioni's words that I find myself still thinking about: "We need to be able to make people understand the importance of science without being perceived as elitist…We need to be flexible. The important thing is to keep learning and adapting. And above all, we need to remember that at the core of everything there is truth and honesty. That's what makes the difference in the end" (p. 142).

A compelling collection with a hidden soul

The collection of essays in *Scientists, Politics, and the Rhetoric of Public Controversy* covers an array of rhetorical tropes, strategies, concepts, and analytical frameworks that allow us to (re)consider important dimensions of the complex and broad role of science communication and scientist-citizens in the contemporary moment. The essays largerly rely on formal argumentative and ancient Greek and Roman frameworks and less on critical cultural orientations to rhetorics of dissent and resistance. Adding more critical cultural examinations of these controversies may have brought otherwise "hidden" elements of these rhetorics to light. But overall, these essays introduce both academic readers and educated citizens to central

tensions emergent in public scientific controversies that are both important and relevant to us all.

Timely examinations of activism "from below" have established an academic conversation (e.g., Ganesh et al., 2005 on "globalization from below"; Agustín and Jørgensen, 2018 on "cosmopolitanism from below"; Schwiertz et al., 2026 on "democracy from below") that this volume could also join. The value of deep (or even broad) formal education is under attack, accompanied by the notion that access to information via the internet (and now AI) can replace guided education, disciplinary histories and experienced mentorship as a way of motivating ethical, care-full knowledge production. The resulting threat to evidence-based reasoning and decision-making entangles the various threads that have shaped our understanding of the role of science and scientists in interpreting the world around us. But whom should we embrace "from below"? And whom should we exclude? Who should have the power to decide what gets used "from below" and how it is used? These important questions also demand further attention.

In this way, the collection reminds us of the central role that the humanities play in helping to untangle the complexities of evidence-based decision--making in contemporary times. Science is no longer value-free, objective reporting of what we can all—experts and non-experts alike—verify through empirical means. Experts are no longer beyond the reach of critical inquiry from non-expert counterparts. This is not necessarily problematic, as many rhetorical scholars focused on critical, power-laden traditions of cultural analysis and criticism have already established. It remains, however, a knotty challenge involving diverse expert and non-expert actors who must recognise and commit to working together to loosen the effects of a knot that is often being pulled tighter even as others work to loosen it. Perhaps this is something that post – and anti-colonial and critical and cultural scholars can expand upon in new and interesting ways.

Individual essays in this volume can appeal to scholars studying rhetoric, democracy, globalisation, science communication, activism and/or international policy. But because they are often written in a clear and compelling way, the chapters may also engage educated readers working in (inter)national and/or institutional science policy, science activism, ecological care and/or educational policy. Given the humanities-based inquiry at the core of this volume, it can also offer compelling material for philosophers, rhetoric-communication scholars, critical and cultural scholars others writing about or inspired by ideology, power, and socio-cultural dynamics.

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