

Caring and Commoning as World(s)-Making Practices and Sites of Ambivalence

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the special issue by examining recent developments around caring and commoning within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and offers an overview of the contributions collected. It approaches caring and commoning as both world(s)-making practices and conceptual resources for thinking and acting towards more equitable and response-able futures. By tracing how these themes have been articulated across contemporary STS debates, we argue that ambivalence constitutes a recurring feature of current engagements with care and commons. Rather than treating it as a marginal effect, we propose ambivalence as a productive analytical lens for understanding the multiple and often contradictory effects of caring and commoning practices. Two major sites of ambivalence are identified. First, caring emerges as indispensable work of maintenance and repair that sustains sociotechnical worlds while also stabilizing existing arrangements through the redistribution of responsibilities and labour. Second, commoning fosters collective governance and political opening while remaining entangled with institutional, market, and infrastructural logics that shape participation, authority, and responsibility. Echoing key STS scholarship, we conclude by positioning ambivalence as a productive analytical perspective for understanding caring and commoning as relational, more-than-human, and intervention-oriented practices through which collective worlds are continuously made, maintained, contested, and transformed.

Keywords

caring; commoning; ambivalence; maintenance; repair; participation.

1. Introduction

In the last decades, STS have witnessed a renewed prominence of critical approaches – particularly feminist, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives – and increasingly productive intersections with adjacent fields such as human geography, environmental humanities, participatory design, and human-computer interaction (e.g., Frauenberger 2019; Papadopoulos et al. 2023; Giaccardi et al. 2025). Such encounters have reinvigorated the politically engaged character

of STS and further revealed an “activist interest” (Sismondo 2008) and a “collaborative turn” (Fariñas 2016) in the field. These trading zones have also become more visible at venues such as the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) and the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST)’s Making and Doing section, which promote scholarly practices that produce STS knowledge and expertise that extend beyond the academic traditional formats, such as papers or research monographs. Engaging in STS through collaborative, committed, and intervention-oriented forms of research grounded in dialogue, participation, and knowledge co-production (Epstein 1996; Martin et al. 2015) brings into focus the ethical, affective, and political dimensions of research practice, as well as its situated, material, and inherently ambivalent character (Marres 2012; Mol et al. 2010). It is within this context that we locate our interest in caring and commoning, both as world(s)-making practices and as conceptual resources for thinking and acting towards more just, equitable and response-able futures (Sciannamblo et al. 2021).

This special issue builds on this commitment by foregrounding the intersections between caring and commoning across a range of empirical and conceptual settings. Consistent with the rich STS literature on care (Lindén and Lydahl 2021), this issue adopts an open and expansive understanding of caring as a practice of maintenance and repair, an ethos, and a conceptual resource for thinking with and acting (Martin et al. 2015; Mol et al. 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Likewise, drawing on a still emerging but growing STS engagement with the commons (Papadopoulos 2018; Sciannamblo et al. 2021), it approaches commoning as the collective practices through which people govern, sustain, and reproduce things held in common, thereby enabling forms of life in common (De Angelis 2019). At its core, this issue is concerned with both the political commitment (Velicu and García-López 2018) and the affective engagement (Poderi 2020) involved in nurturing and sustaining what is held in common (Poderi 2021; Singh 2017). Commoning and caring prompt us to reconsider human-nature and more-than-human relationships in ways that challenge dominant extractivist models of contemporary Western capitalism, and which foster the production of ourselves as a common subject (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Federici 2018). In this spirit, this special issue reflects our (the guest editors) long-standing collaborative engagement with these concerns, bringing together STS perspectives on knowledge-making and intervention-oriented practices to examine caring and commoning as situated processes of world-making.

Against this backdrop, the development of this editorial project has unfolded against a profoundly changing global landscape. The outbreak of new wars and extreme forms of violence, including the ongoing genocide in Palestine, has led us to reflect on what it means to remain committed to research practices grounded in caring and commoning when the world around us appears increasingly shaped by their opposites: systemic uncaring, dispossession, enclosure, and the erosion of shared resources. From this historical and political conjuncture emerges a broader question about how caring and commoning are currently articulated within contemporary STS. To what extent do these themes continue to inform the field? Through which concepts, empirical domains, and political concerns are they being addressed today? Have caring and commoning remained visible as explicit analytical and political commitments, or have they been reconfigured through adjacent conversations and emerging areas of inquiry?

We approached this inquiry from the shared impression that caring and commoning had become less visible as explicit categories in major STS venues compared to a few years ago.

In this spirit, we mapped recent STS discussions by examining journal publications in *Social Studies of Science* and *Science, Technology, & Human Values* published during the past three years (2023-2026, the period corresponding to the development of this special issue) as well as conference programmes, panel descriptions, and calls for participation associated with recent editions of 4S (Toronto 2026) and EASST (Krakow 2026). We treat these materials not as evidence of settled debates, but as indicators of emerging interests and concerns among STS scholars. At the same time, we acknowledge that STS has historically been shaped by a predominantly Euro-Atlantic intellectual trajectory (Mongili 2025), and that many of the concerns surrounding care, relationality, and collective life have also been developed through postcolonial, decolonial, Indigenous, and Global South scholarship (e.g., Bocarejo 2024; Kothari et al. 2019). Our mapping should therefore be read as a situated and partial account rather than a comprehensive representation of contemporary debates. Nevertheless, this exploratory exercise offers useful insights into the recurring concerns and analytical sensibilities about caring and commoning within STS, while also helping to situate the contribution of this special issue within a broader intellectual movement concerned with care, commons, relationality, and collective forms of world-making. What emerges is not their disappearance from the debate, but their rearticulation through a range of adjacent topics and empirical domains. More importantly, across these diverse discussions we identified a recurring concern with the tensions, frictions, and uneven effects that accompany practices of caring and commoning. It is this recurring concern that leads us to foreground *ambivalence* as a key analytical lens for understanding their contemporary articulations.

2. Sites of Ambivalence in Caring and Commoning Practices

A central insight emerging from the contributions collected in this special issue is that ambivalence constitutes a key analytical lens for understanding practices of caring and commoning. Rather than being intrinsically emancipatory, these practices are situated processes that may simultaneously enable transformation while contributing to the stabilization of existing arrangements, the delegation of responsibility, or forms of institutional capture. This may occur, for example, when care and solidarity networks are mobilized to compensate for the retrenchment of public services under austerity measures, effectively redistributing responsibilities from public institutions to individuals, families, communities, and grassroots organizations. As STS scholars have repeatedly shown, care is never innocent, neutral, or universally beneficial as it entails situated choices, exclusions, attachments, obligations, and uneven distributions of work and responsibility (Mol 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Similarly, commons and commoning are not inherently emancipatory arrangements but emerge through ongoing negotiations over access, participation, governance, and the reproduction of collective life.

From this point of view, rather than treating these tensions as anomalies or failures, we approach them as constitutive features of practices of caring and commoning themselves. The key question, therefore, is no longer whether care- or commons-oriented practices are normatively desirable, but under what conditions, through which sociotechnical arrangements, and with what political effects they operate.

The contributions gathered in this special issue offer empirical insights into these questions, showing how ambivalence runs through diverse practices of caring and commoning and shapes their possibilities, limits, and consequences. Un-commoning practices emerge as ways of resisting enclosure while simultaneously revealing how digital infrastructures and AI systems generate new forms of enclosure, exclusion and foreclosure (Light, *this issue*). Software maintenance appears as a practice of care that sustains digital worlds, yet one that also exposes maintainers to dependency, exhaustion, and obsolescence (Ojala, *this issue*). Telecare initiatives developed by civil society actors during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate how ICT-enabled forms of care can foster solidarity and inclusion while at the same time compensating for institutional shortcomings and uneven distributions of support (Cibin, *this issue*). Finally, Senft shows how foraging can be understood as a form of response-ability that sustains both human livelihoods and more-than-human commons, foregrounding the entanglement of environmental care, subsistence, and more-than-human relations (Senft, *this issue*).

Ambivalence thus emerges as an analytical lens for understanding how caring and commoning appear as practices that hold together repair and vulnerability, openness and closure, collective support and unequal responsibility.

3. Care between Necessary Work and Devices of Stabilization

A first major site of ambivalence concerns care itself. We adopt a broad understanding of care – as maintenance, repair, ethos, and conceptual tool – while insisting that caring is never neutral or cost-free. In this framing, maintenance and repair are not only examples of care but also the material practices through which care becomes visible (Ojala, *this issue*; Denis et al. 2015). They render tangible the selective decisions that caring always entails: what is maintained, what is repaired, what is allowed to decay, whose needs are prioritized and whose are deferred (Mattern 2018; Denis 2019). These dynamics are already manifest in Annemarie Mol’s reflections on the “logic of care” in the context of diabetes treatment (Mol 2008), where “care” is framed as an ongoing process of adaptability and tinkering with bodies, technologies, and knowledge to find what works for a specific person’s complex life. More STS literature repeatedly shows that care is sustained through invisible, precarious, and unevenly distributed labor, enabling the everyday functioning of healthcare systems, research infrastructures, and environmental management without being fully recognized or valued (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Recent studies explicitly frame maintenance and repair as forms of political and epistemic work rather than residual activities – for example in analyses of infrastructural maintenance as affective and contested practice (Hetherington and Jalbert 2023), or of innovation regimes that depend on ongoing maintenance labor while rhetorically marginalizing it (Cuevas-Garcia et al. 2024), and care infrastructures whose maintenance sustains continuity while simultaneously dampening pressures for structural change (Goggins 2025).

Here, one of the central ambivalences of care becomes visible: it is indispensable for sustaining sociotechnical systems, yet precisely for that reason it may also function as a mechanism of stabilization, mitigating crises without challenging their root causes. This ambivalence is further intensified when care is translated into technical or organizational solutions.

Recent discussions at 4S 2026 and EASST 2026 on AI (Alcaras and Ricci 2026; Lee and Yoo 2026; Khan 2026; Wienroth et al. 2026; Troszynsju and Bielinski 2026) and on digital health and welfare technologies (Søraa et al. 2026; Oldenhof et al. 2026; Nickelsen et al. 2026) has shown how care-oriented technologies can operate as devices of responsibility delegation, shifting burdens from collective and institutional arrangements onto individuals, families, or communities, while framing this shift as innovation or empowerment.

The ambivalence here does not lie in technological failure, but in how care is reconfigured as a distributive mechanism, normalizing disinvestment and austerity under the sign of caring solutions.

4. Commoning between Political Opening and Institutional Capture

A second, closely related site of ambivalence concerns commoning. This issue approaches commons as matters of care and commoning as practices of reproducing life in common. Yet literature recently showed that commoning processes are rarely autonomous or harmonious as they are deeply embedded in institutional, economic, and infrastructural regimes.

This ambivalence is particularly evident in historical and contemporary analyses of knowledge commons. For example, Sturdy's (2025) account of the *genomic commons* demonstrates how commons-based rhetoric can be mobilized to manage intellectual property and commercial interests, revealing commoning as a negotiated and strategically ambiguous practice rather than a straightforward alternative to enclosure.

Other very recent contributions document attempts to build research commons through alliances with local communities and public funding (Benedito and Sanabria 2026), while also exposing how public infrastructures and data regimes are reconfigured through platformization and assetization (Faulkner-Gurstein and Wyatt 2023). Across these cases, commoning emerges as a double-edged practice: it can open spaces for collective governance and solidarity, yet it can also serve as a legitimating discourse for market-oriented or extractive arrangements.

Similarly, the programmes and panel proposals for the 2026 meetings of 4S and focused on health (Moore et al. 2026), data governance (Jeffrey and Gehl 2026), environmental stewardship (Filipe 2026), and AI governance (Seabrook 2026) reveal how commons-based imaginaries often coexist with commercial logics and remain entangled with powerful institutional actors. The tension is therefore not between "authentic" and "corrupted" commons, but between different modes of institutionalizing the common.

Moreover, commoning requires continuous social and relational maintenance connected to rule-making, conflict management, and infrastructural upkeep. Research on environmental stewardship and data activism (Filipe 2026), among other domains, shows that this labor is often unevenly distributed and may generate new forms of fatigue, exclusion, or responsibility shifting, particularly when commoning is positioned as a lightweight alternative to public provision.

These tensions also extend to the intervention-oriented methodologies through which caring and commoning are enacted within STS. While action research, co-design, co-production, and citizen science have become central to collaborative engagements, recent work questions the assumption that participation automatically produces transformation (Landström et al. 2024) and shows how collaborative processes remain shaped by institutional and

sociotechnical arrangements (Tsouvalis et al. 2025). Rather than assuming collaboration to be inherently democratic or emancipatory, these studies foreground the conditions under which it can meaningfully redistribute authority, responsibility, expertise, and labour.

5. Conclusion: Rethinking Caring and Commoning through Ambivalence

Across the diverse strands of STS scholarship discussed above, a common insight emerges: ambivalence is not a marginal effect of caring and commoning, but a constitutive condition through which these practices unfold. This becomes particularly visible in more-than-human contexts, where recent work on contamination, environmental repair, extraction, and environmental governance shows that caring for some entities often entails new forms of exclusion, vulnerability, or harm for others (Underhill and Barad 2025; Delgado 2024; Delgado and Bauer 2024; Dey 2025). Across these discussions, caring and commoning in ecological contexts emerge as deeply ambivalent practices, redistributing vulnerability and responsibility rather than resolving them.

Approaching caring and commoning through the lens of ambivalence allows us to move beyond normative expectations that cast these practices as either inherently emancipatory or inevitably co-opted. It is precisely the STS commitment to overcoming technological determinisms, normative binaries, and simplified accounts of technoscientific phenomena that makes such an approach possible. Rather than reducing caring and commoning to celebratory narratives or cynical dismissal, STS invites us to attend to the multiple, situated, and often contradictory effects through which these practices are enacted.

This special issue adopts precisely this analytical perspective. Rather than asking whether care and commoning are desirable in the abstract, the contributions explore *how* these practices operate, *for whom*, under *which conditions*, at *what costs*, and with *what* stabilizing or transformative *effects*. In doing so, they position ambivalence as a productive lens for understanding caring and commoning as practices of world-making that hold together solidarity and conflict, responsibility and power, hope and limit.

The contributions presented here approach world-making as situated commoning and/or caring practices through which shared worlds are continuously sustained, negotiated, and sometimes strained¹. Across AI imaginaries, digital infrastructures, pandemic responses, and forest ecologies, the articles collected in this special issue trace how commons emerge through everyday acts of maintaining, caring, attuning, and responding – often beyond institutional designs or political programs. Together, they invite STS scholars to conceive care as relational, more-than-human, and non-innocent – embedded in precarity and unequal conditions, yet central to the ongoing livability of collective worlds – and at the same time to rethink commons as fragile achievements of world-making, enacted through practices that hold open possibilities for shared futures while remaining attentive to their limits and exclusions.

In her contribution, Ann Light advances un-commoning as a performative, processual practice of care that keeps worlds open, provisional, and responsive to difference. Through this she interrogates enclosure as a linguistic and infrastructural process through which both land and data are appropriated and futures foreclosed. The contribution mobilises feminist

STS, as well as indigenous and decolonial scholarship to argue that AI and data practices actively make static and exclusionary worlds. In so doing the contribution foregrounds un-commoning as ongoing world-making that resists enclosure not only materially, but at the level of language, knowledge, and computation itself.

On the same note, Mace Ojala focuses on maintain-ability as the ability to both give and receive care within sociotechnical worlds shaped by constantly-aging software. His work relies on ethnographic fieldwork with software maintainers, and it foregrounds software maintenance as a form of everyday commoning that sustains livelihoods, identities, and infrastructures through fragile continuous relations of care. The article challenges innovation-centric imaginaries and effectively reveals how contemporary software-based infrastructures rely on maintaining – not just building – technological commons. Ultimately, maintain-ability names a condition for sustaining shared worlds in a broken, obsolescence-prone digital present.

The contribution by Roberto Cibilin reflects back onto the role of telecare practices to address the information crisis and intersecting inequalities during COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on nearly 300 civil society initiatives across Europe and using STS perspectives on care and commoning, Cibilin shows how helplines, platforms, and mutual aid infrastructures supported forms of care beyond professionalised healthcare settings. The analysis highlights varying degrees of participation and reveals care as a collective, infrastructural achievement which is also shaped by vulnerability and inequality.

In the last essay, Lukáš Senft defines foraging response-ability as an everyday commoning practice through which humans and forest collectives co-constitute multispecies worlds of care. His ethnographic work in Czech forests clarifies how foragers enact non-innocent, and non-instrumental forms of care that sustain both foragers' livelihoods and surrounding ecosystems without necessarily buying into either extractivist or activist logics. By foregrounding attunement, maintenance of openness, and reciprocal human-nonhuman care, Senft reinforces the idea of commons as fragile, lived relations continually made and remade through practice.

The *Crossing Boundaries* section "World(s)-making through data work, activism, and more-than-human encounters" brings together three reflective interventions that approach care and commoning from different angles. Yana Boeva foregrounds the convergence of care and commoning in data, automation, and AI, showing how invisible data work and digital commons sustain contemporary technoscience while remaining structurally undervalued and politically contested. Cindy Kohtala examines scholar-activism "out here" in grassroots and alternative technology milieus, articulating the interstice or milieu of the "between" as a fragile space where researchers become commoners themselves, negotiating care, conflict, and complicity across academic and activist worlds. Finally, Jonas Fritsch offers an autoethnographic account of affective, more-than-human encounters at the margins of research, tracing how being touched by a place can generate careful forms of world-making that blur boundaries between research, life, and ethical commitment.

Overall, this special issue does not seek to resolve the ambivalences that traverse caring and commoning, but rather to dwell with them as necessary conditions for thinking with and practicing more just and livable worlds. In doing so, we echo the approach of several STS pivotal works that position ambivalence as a central condition of world(s)-making practices concerning science and technology (e.g., Bowker and Star 1999; Mol 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Papadopoulos 2018). When examined through the lens of caring and commoning, these practices

bring to the fore tensions between visible and invisible work, openness and closure, collaboration and capture, while also foregrounding the condition of operating in “high tension zones” (Star 1990) as scholars and practitioners – neither fully at the centre of networks nor entirely outside them – while continuously questioning the unequal distribution of power. In this sense, the special issue contributes to sustaining a space for inquiry that remains open to ambivalence and committed to engagement within more-than-human entanglements.

Notes

¹ The development of this special issue builds on earlier discussions initiated through panels on caring and commoning at the Danish Association for Science and Technology Studies Conference (2022) and the STS Italia Conference (2023). Following the call for papers (May 2023), 18 abstracts were received, 8 full papers were solicited, and 4 articles were selected after peer review, complemented by three invited contributions included in the *Crossing Boundaries* section.

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