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Lutz, Lucy Suchman & Helen  
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## **Attending to Screens and Screenness**

Guest editorial for special issue of  
Encounters

Brit Ross Winthereik, Peter A. Lutz, Lucy Suchman &  
Helen Verran

**DASTS** er en faglig forening for STS i Danmark med det formål at stimulere kvaliteten, bredden og samarbejdet inden for dansk STS-forskning samt at markere dansk STS tydeligere i nationale og internationale sammenhænge.

# Attending to Screens and Screenness

## Guest editorial for special issue of Encounters

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This special issue is a follow up on a PhD course entitled “Framing Screens: Knowledge, Interaction and Practice” held at the IT University of Copenhagen in the fall of 2010. Course participants from a variety of disciplines and countries joined the senior faculty who served as midwives for the births of new understandings and conceptualizations of *screens*.

In the call for participation the ubiquity of screens was described as one of the reasons cultural/media studies, design studies, science and technology studies, information studies and anthropology ought to be interested in this topic empirically and analytically. It was suggested that screens play an increasingly central role in a wide range of human practices relating to work, play, travel, care, learning, planning, monitoring, designing, coordinating and much else. It was also suggested that this centrality might fruitfully be addressed by figuring them as participants in constructions of vision and action rather than as innocent bystanders in processes of knowledge production and interaction. Because screens organize interaction they can be seen as cutting off particular views and viewers as well as connecting them. Screens stretch human interactions in time and space, and produce new spaces and forms of interaction.

All these aspects of screens were discussed in relation to the students’ own work during the course. In several of the papers screens were described as relatively stable material objects or as metaphors for filtering processes. When coupled with the relational ontology introduced in different ways by the two anchor teachers Lucy Such-

man and Helen Verran, conceptualizing screens as material-semiotic objects spurred challenging and fertile discussions on *screenness*. Two proposals that recurred during these discussions related to:

- Analyzing screens as indexes.
- Attending to the capacity of screens to configure bodies and practices thereby creating new accountabilities.

The first theme – screens as indexes – was introduced by Verran who suggested that students view ‘their’ screens as ordering devices with interventionist capacities. Like the index of a book or the front of an archival box, screens organize interaction and knowledge practices but they do so in complex ways. Based on research of reversed distance learning the project, *Teaching from Country*, Verran argued for a ‘screens inversion’ aiming at unpacking the ontological work of screens.

The second theme – attending to configurations and accountabilities – was proposed by Suchman who discussed examples of screens and body-work. Her argument entails looking beyond the physical screen for reconfigurations in the wider context.

Both Verran and Suchman proposed to discuss issues pertaining to accountability and responsibility of the ethnographic stories told within the framework of a study on screens. Several questions emerged. How might one make ‘cuts’ in the ethnographic material on screens that allows for accountability both in analytical terms, in relation to academic peers, and in practical terms. And how to write ethnographic stories that bring the ontological commitments and the infra-structural work of screens into the picture? Christopher Gad, whose guest presentation was based on an example of computer screens used for surveillance in fishery control, suggested an approach where the screen is taken onboard as a metaphor for the partiality of any field of vision.

In this collection of articles one recognizes the conceptualizations of screens that were introduced and discussed during the course.

The first contribution by Karen Boll investigates an instance of what tax officials refer to as 'responsive regulation'. The article tells the story of an unannounced raid into a number of small businesses in south Copenhagen that are investigated for their 'compliance' to tax laws. Following Helen Verran's notion of *relational empiricism* Boll argues that different logics of generalization and valuation are at play as inspectors and business owners engage in valuing the current state-of-affairs in the businesses. Based on an analysis of such differing logics, Boll argues that tax inspectors primarily act responsively towards a general public but less so towards the individual businesses as the model prescribes. In her article the notion of the screen is conjured as a device characterizing the tax inspectors' modes of engagement with the businesses under investigation.

In the second contribution by Katrina Petersen the screen appears in the form of a map. In spite of its mundaneness, this screen is nevertheless hard to grasp, partly because it is brought into being along with the distributed knowledges that it seeks to represent. Analyzing a Google mash-up map designed by an ad hoc network of actors in response to the 2007 Californian wildfires, Petersen explores how diverse actors and technologies interact to produce mutually legitimate ways of knowing the disaster. The article shows how a mash-up of the fires, designers and the map itself turns into an emerging source of authority in the understanding a wildfire and its management.

Andrés Valderrama Pineda also writes about maps. His article traces the discussions surrounding the development of a map of the urban transportation system in Bogotá Columbia. He shows how the experts involved in the development of the map did not only discuss the content of this representation (the map) but also the design of the transportation system itself. The map functioned as a screen, Pineda argues, in that it is simultaneously organized (it represents

the transportation system) and was organizing (it performs activities relating to the re-design of the transportation system). In its capacity as both representational and performative device, the map made new user groups appear that came to supplement the dominant view of 'the normal user' held by the experts.

Helene Ratner analyses the impact of a formalized action plan in use for 'problematic' children in Danish primary schools. She refers to this action plan as an emerging screening device, which distributes agency and creates new positions as it emerges as a tool. This the school managers use this tool to distinguish between teachers' "knowledge" about children on the one hand and what they refer to as "mere opinioning" on the other. Ratner illustrates that, in its everyday enactments, the action plan is not simply a solution to teachers' challenges. The action plan also creates new boundaries between teachers and managers. Its screening properties thus interfere with other matters of concern at the school, including how time is administered and spent.

The contribution by Antti Silvast is a study of the screen as an artifact in the control rooms of an electricity company. Building on new sociological research on markets and information and communication technologies he pays special attention to the computer screens that depict Nordic energy markets to control room workers. The analysis illustrates how the screens and the software on them discipline control room work and extend the capabilities that the control room workers have for calculating future uncertainties. The article shows how local practices and apparatuses in the control room, including the screens, make the global marketplace on electricity and the availability of energy quantities appear in particular ways.

"The First Encounter" by Jane Bjørn Vedel tells the story of a group of Danish research managers traveling to visit a group of researchers at a not-for-profit research organization in the US. The encounter between the two groups is the basis for Vedel's analysis of the role of *difference* in research collaborations. In her analysis, the notion of the screen is used as a metaphor for moments of connec-

tion and division between the groups of researchers. The analysis discusses whether difference is a hindrance to research collaboration or whether it might rather be that which makes collaboration take off. If difference is not a hindrance in research collaboration, then the dynamics and implications of science-industry relations need to be reconsidered.

The final contribution by Malte Ziewitz takes as its starting point that the analytical status of screens cannot be taken for granted it proposes that, instead of attending to screens as placeholders, extensions or mediators of human action, screens provide a useful heuristic for orienting social inquiry in particular situations. Starting from the puzzling observation that screens seem both ubiquitously present and conspicuously absent in everyday life, Ziewitz uses an ethnographic study of web-based patient feedback to show how screens are enacted along with researcher responsibilities when doing ethnography on screens and screenness.