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The Asian turn toward Science and Technology Studies (STS)

Three decades after its coinage in North America, the acronym STS (Science & Technology Studies or Science, Technology, and Society) is experiencing something of a second birth in East and Southeast Asia. An "East Asian STS Network" has formed among Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean, and more recently Mainland Chinese scholars, and at the National University of Singapore we've formed an STS Research Cluster and conducted a global job search under this rubric. Indian research communities which have long organized themselves under this acronym are beginning to make contact with like-minded scholars farther east, rather than exclusively engaging those to the west. New STS groupings are also forming to the south - in Australia - partly influenced by the growth of this interdisciplinary field in Asia. My talk will discuss what this phenomenon means, provide it with some historical and geographic context, and speculate on its import for future regional and trans-continental academic relationships. I will be both supportive and critical of this turn, and will particularly consider its import for the fields of media and digital studies.

One argument I'll make is that the study of the relationship between "technology" and "society" need not (and should not) be reinvented with the coming of each specific new technology, such as digital media or biomedicine. Conceiving our field in broader theoretical and philosophical terms not only gives greater depth to our pronouncements about technology and its effects, but avoids the trap of techno-enthusiasm, which colors too much of even academic writing about so-called "cutting-edge" technologies. I'll discuss potential tensions between STS as a broad and essentially critical field of the humanities and social sciences, and the imperatives of national governments, granting agencies, and other patrons.