

***Challenges in Rhetoric of Science and  
Technology: ARST Report***



## **Introduction**

### **Communications from the Association for Rhetoric of Science and Technology (ARST)**

#### **Karen Taylor**

*President, Association for Rhetoric of Science and Technology*

*Poroi, 7,1 (January 2011)*

The annual pre-conference of the Association for Rhetoric of Science and Technology (ARST) has been a tradition since 1997, five years after the initial formation of the association. The gathering has generally consisted of approximately 20-25 members of ARST. The event is held the day before the convention of the National Communication Association, our discipline's largest professional association, begins and is followed by a group dinner. (The meetings of the NCA average about 6000 participants, only a small fraction of whom research and practice rhetoric of science and technology).

ARST pre-conferences are generally devoted to a topic, sometimes around presentations by an invited guest and members. One year we discussed the rhetoric of intelligent design. But virtually every year there has also been an interactive component. One year participants compiled a list of key terms in our field. Another session was on sharing teaching resources. Another still was devoted to *pro bono* consulting with active science-communication experts working in corporations, research institutions ranging from Fermilab to an ophthalmology research clinic, and public policy organizations. This year's interactive activity consisted of panels of members who have been dealing on a daily basis with four themes that are currently at the forefront of public and technical interest. The panels articulated main points of consensus as we see them emerging from the ongoing research projects on these topics by ARST members currently engaged with them. The four reports that follow this brief introduction summarize the consensus reached by each panel.

There are certain perennial issues that emerge and re-emerge when engaged in theorizing or practicing rhetoric of science and technology. Still, at any given time some come more into focus than others. The *problem of risk* is an example. Risk poses a rhetorical as well as technical issue just because there is no final simple answer as to how much fear is warranted in a given case and when the fear that arises from cautionary interventions begins to interfere with optimal functioning of interaction between technical and public spheres. The *problem of expertise* is another example. Democracy is inherently in tension with the pronouncements of technocrats. Panels reported on these two areas. Two other panels were centered on areas of science that are currently undergoing rapid change and development. These are on neuroscience

and on patient-centered medical practice. The subject of nanoscience is also mentioned in the reports.

It was not clear prior to the conference whether agreement could be reached on anything more than basic statements about some of the challenges in each area and of why these issues have currently emerged as having a rhetorical dimension that is in need of negotiation and re-negotiation. In the end the panels went somewhat further than that. During the working sessions, consensus was reached about why the challenges posed are in fact difficult and about what participants can do next by way of productive intervention and in some cases collective action.

The authors of these reports are not necessarily signing agreements that the positions reported are final statements. They do, however, represent a current snapshot of where researchers currently working on these topics can and should come together. Each paper includes, too, an extensive bibliography. Given the necessarily interdisciplinary background of ARST participants, one of the best parts of the pre-conference is the opportunity to share resources. The authors hope that the range of the bibliographies included here provides both useful tools and a sense of shared excitement with which they were compiled.

ARST appreciates the good offices of *POROI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis and Invention* for hosting these reports. We hope to make more such reports of our shared work available in the future in this way.