Managing Ambiguities at the Edge of Knowledge: Research Strategy and Artificial Intelligence Labs in an Era of Academic Capitalism

Abstract:
Many research-intensive universities have moved into the business of promoting cutting-edge technologies that promise revenue, impact, and legitimacy. While the scholarship on academic capitalism has documented the general dynamics of this institutional shift, we know less about the ground-level challenges of research priority and scientific problem choice. This paper unites the practice tradition in science and technology studies with an organizational analysis of decision-making to compare how two university artificial intelligence labs manage characteristic ambiguities at the edge of scientific knowledge. One lab focuses on garnering funding through commercialization schemes while the other is oriented to federal science agencies. The ethnographic comparison identifies the mechanisms through which an industry-oriented lab can be highly adventurous yet choke off contributions to theory. However, the comparison does not yield to an all-too-easy nostalgia for federalized science by identifying the mechanisms through which agency-oriented labs can pursue a thick and consistent research portfolio but in a strikingly myopic fashion.