

University of York STS Roundtable

Workshop Report and Forward Look

Building Interdisciplinary Analysis and Capacity: the UoYSTS Roundtable

Introduction

The Workshop (held on July 6 at the UoY) brought together over 50 colleagues from the University of York and wider region to explore possibilities for joint, trans-disciplinary research. Four themes provided a broad analytical canvas on which to open up the debate: governance, metrics and data, temporality and innovation. The meeting opened with a keynote address by Steve Fuller, Professor of Social Epistemology at Warwick, followed by panels on each theme and a detailed, more empirically focused, debate in the afternoon 'sandpit' session. The meeting concluded with feedback and suggestions for collaborative research.

Steve Fuller's address provided much food for thought about disciplines, their boundaries and their both positive and negative aspects, and how STS can challenge what he describes as 'epistemic rent-seeking', that is, the policing and intellectual control over disciplines/disciplinary expertise that is typically found in expert domains. Steve argued that this isn't enough for we need to think of new ways in which we can develop new approaches to knowledge – that are both analytical and normative – as well as novel ways of engaging with diverse sources of data (moving from, for example, data mining to 'data surfacing'), and relaxing our conventions about how knowledge is framed and understood as such. This was an excellent call to delegates to think out of their disciplinary boxes.

Steve's talk was recorded and is available at:

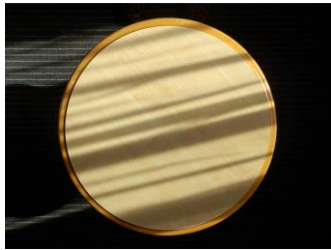
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/sfuller/media/audio>

See number 133 on the listing.

The problem posed by Interdisciplinarity

The breakout groups explored the challenges of building interdisciplinary work. The governance group provides a useful summary of some of the main points that need to be considered.

Internal challenges associated to the integration of disciplines in STS research. There is a clear agreement about the necessary convergence of different disciplines and approaches to address complex issues in STS. Regenerative medicine for instance cannot be reduced only to its biological or medical aspects since it involves a number of ethical and social dimensions that can be better explored through the lenses of social sciences such as sociology and political economy. However, the integration of different disciplines is perceived as challenge in itself in what the group called the "lack of a normative horizon". In particular it's not clear what defines expertise in multidisciplinary work and how that definition could be achieved.



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The problem of integration is not restricted to expertise but also to ethics. It is not clear how to reach a common ethical framework for all disciplines or at least how to deal with different cohabiting frameworks.

Similarly, it seems necessary to identify what constitutes responsible research in innovation about existing, emerging and new technologies avoiding overpromises about technologies and the future.

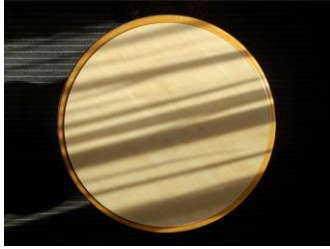
Finally, interdisciplinary research brings about the definition of demarcation criteria. It is not clear how to determine which disciplines can be included or excluded in interdisciplinary research and why. This is particularly important regarding the involvement of arts and humanities and their potential contribution to interdisciplinary practice in STS.

External challenges of interdisciplinary research in society. Another aspect that needs to be considered is the relationship between interdisciplinary research and the wider socio-political context of each country.

Interdisciplinary research might be facilitated or obstructed by national and international regulations and legislation. These norms may affect several phases of research practice process, from the collection of data to the dissemination of knowledge. They may also impose restrictions to the production and development of new technologies and solutions and set different and even conflicting frameworks regarding their intellectual property. Countries differ regarding the extent to which each they apply these norms and frameworks in more flexible or strict ways. These differences impact the freedom to carry out interdisciplinary research at international levels by imposing constraints or even censorship on knowledge production and dissemination

Differences in the socio-political context of a country may also affect the way in which Social Sciences are perceived as sources of "legitimate knowledge". This lack of legitimation is also reflected in the allocation of resources to researchers working in interdisciplinary projects. The allocation of resources may become a political way to discipline a field and the development of skills in a particular area.

Interdisciplinary researchers that cannot fully participate in the discussion of public policies due to technocratic exclusion or funding disciplining cannot contribute their views on the acceptability of risks based on merely technical and political decisions. The disposal of nuclear waste can be seen as an example of a socio-political problem where the voice of interdisciplinary researchers is urgently needed. An integrated approach in STS is perceived as necessary in order to address the nature of risk assessment and the way it is currently practiced. Finally, finding appropriate ways to communicate the results of our actions to future generations is also perceived as an important challenge to STS research and its ethical duty.



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Ideas for future collaborative research

The Workshop generated various possibilities for future collaborative research with four being most promising. These four can be characterised as asking problems that demand a collaborative research approach and the discussion of the four groups on metrics, innovation, governance and temporalities. These are to be developed by delegates over the coming months for submission to diverse funding agencies.

Andrew Webster (Chair)