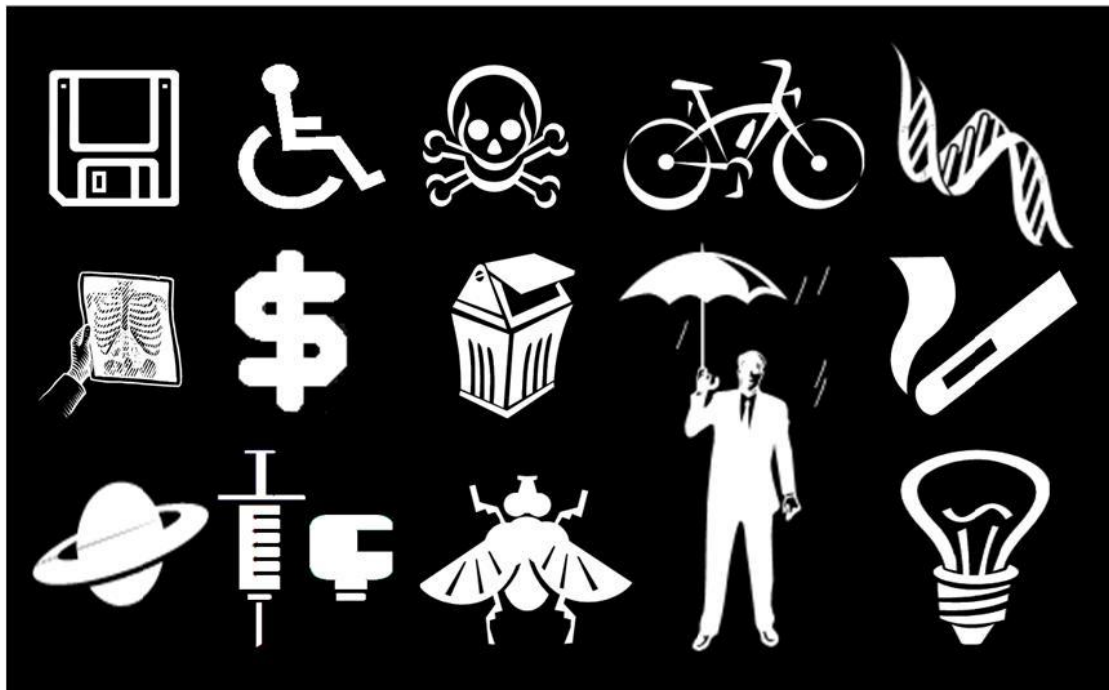


PSTS

Postgraduate
Science & Technology Studies

Conference Report 2009



Institute for Science and Society
SCIENCE • TECHNOLOGY • SOCIETY



The University of Nottingham
Graduate School

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PSTS Conference 2009

The first Postgraduate Science and Technology Studies (PSTS) annual conference was hosted by the Institute for Science and Society at the University of Nottingham on the 28th and 29th of July 2009.

During the conference, it quickly became clear that whilst students, academics and departments within STS are feeling the pressure of the economic shifts as much as any other profession, more positively, postgraduates in STS are ideally placed to contribute to discussions on some of the most pressing global problems. As one of the plenary speakers noted, there is an increasing demand from research councils for social science input into scientific research projects and our current postgraduates will play a major role in these novel cross-disciplinary engagements.

Conference aims

STS scholars work across a wide range of disciplines and there are various conferences that a postgraduate entering this community can attend; however, the PSTS organisers identified the need for a forum where postgraduates working on STS issues in the UK could share their ideas in a supportive environment. The aim of the PSTS conference was to fill this gap through the provision of an affordable and professional conference.

The meeting format was designed to allow for a relaxed interaction between junior scholars. It is hoped that fostering such interactions at an early career stage will contribute to longer-term relationships and working partnerships between participants. On top of that, the conference aimed to encourage the development of academic and professional skills such as presenting, chairing, questioning, debating, critiquing, networking, and organising that are so central to a successful career.

Conference funding and organisation

The conference was developed and organised by a group of postgraduate students at the Institute for Science and Society: Andrew S. Balmer (co-chair), Catriona Rooke (co-chair), Catherine Coveney, Richard Elliott, Burcu Gorgulu, Martyn Pickersgill, Kate Roach and Natewinde Sawadogo. We received advice and support from everyone at ISS, particularly Prof. Robert Dingwall, Prof. Anne Murcott, Prof. Brigitte Nerlich and Dr. Paul Martin.

PSTS was supported by funding from the Graduate School at the University of Nottingham and the Foundation for the Sociology of Health and Illness. The Graduate School hosted the event and provided Robert's Money as a basic support to the conference. The Foundation for the Sociology of Health and Illness funded the SHI meets STS streams

Conference participants

The inaugural PSTS conference was attended by over 50 postgraduate students. The majority of postgraduates came from universities within the UK, although 10 postgraduates travelled from countries further afield – including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Portugal and Sweden. Many universities within the UK were represented. Over half of those who attended PSTS were based at the University of Nottingham, the University of Oxford or Edinburgh University; however, postgraduates also came from Leeds, London, Warwick, Sussex, Southampton, Newcastle, Cardiff and Exeter to attend the conference.

Postgraduates who attended PSTS were also from a wide range of disciplines, reflecting the diversity within the field. Some postgraduates came from departments more specifically focussed on STS, such as: the Institute for Science and Society at the University of Nottingham; the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society at the University of Oxford; the Science, Technology and Policy Studies department at the University of Twente; Science, Technology and Innovation Studies at the University of Edinburgh and BIOS at the London School of Economics. Many others were from the social sciences, with sociology, anthropology and politics represented. Others came from departments as diverse as cultural studies, development studies, law, health and social studies, geography and the environment, nursing, and veterinary science.

Topics addressed

53 oral presentations were delivered by delegates across both days of the conference. The heterogeneous nature of STS and overlap of many papers with other areas of social, scientific and medical research made classifying them into coherent streams a challenging task for the conference committee. As a result, abstracts were organised into 15 paper sessions on rather pragmatic grounds, with papers loosely grouped together on a thematic basis.

Several sessions were topic-based, bringing together different STS perspectives in the analysis of: novel developments in contemporary neuroscience; regenerative medicine and stem cell science; ICTs; science policy; social movements; and current environmental issues. Other paper streams were organised around the theoretical perspective adopted. These ranged from actor-network theory to public understanding of science, and included sessions on expertise and the sociology of knowledge. Collectively, the papers presented in these streams addressed an array of technological systems, scientific and medical practices and policy developments.

In addition, kindly sponsored by the Sociology of Health and Illness Foundation, ten papers were organised into the ‘Sociology of Health and Illness meets STS’ theme. These papers showcased the variety of ways in which STS methods and theories can make new, exciting and worthwhile contributions to older debates within well-established fields in sociology.

The diversity of STS perspectives and range of topics to which an STS analysis is valuable was evident throughout the conference. There was ample time set aside during each paper session to encourage both speakers and delegates to raise questions and discuss the value of using STS perspectives in the analysis of some of today's most pertinent social, ethical and cultural developments in science, technology and medicine.

Plenary sessions and workshops

The PSTS Conference hosted talks by leaders in the field. Prof. Robert Dingwall (Director of ISS) gave the welcome address. He highlighted the unique interdisciplinary nature of STS research and encouraged postgraduate participants to utilise these skills in wider social research. He was followed by a stimulating presentation from Prof. Adam Hedgecoe (Associate Director of Cesagen at Cardiff University). Prof. Hedgecoe contextualised the major STS theories and discussed how they contributed to the emergence of, and might aid the contemporary practice of, bioethics. He argued that STS researchers should seek to contribute to the wider sociological research literature. He encouraged postgraduate students, as they move in their careers, to consider publishing in less specialist journals where appropriate, and to remember that STS has broad appeal.

The conference was closed with presentations from Dr Nik Brown (Co-director of SATSU at the University of York) and Dr Sujatha Raman (ISS). Dr. Brown gave a stimulating plenary on conflicts over the recent UK Trans-species embryo legislation. He outlined the debates around hybrid sociology, queer theory, post-humanism and politics of life, and how these might have contributed to the fundamental regulatory tensions which concurrently bans and permits the production of trans-species hybrid embryos. He also commented on the unease in mediating between science and (its) publics in the epistemological and ethical distinctions.

Dr. Raman sketched the history of STS in North America and the UK. While drawing on differences in motivations and applications of STS research in different academic and cultural settings, she highlighted the uniqueness of British STS in its focus on public understanding and engagement of science and technology. She argued that there are now more demands on researchers to mediate between science, engineering and society more broadly, and that the PSTS participants are uniquely situated to become leaders in achieving this interest.

After the official close of the conference, many delegates stayed to attend one of the two workshops that were offered. Prof. Anne Murcott (ISS) showcased the COW (Craft of Writing) workshop that she runs for postgraduates within ISS. The COW workshop provides an excellent opportunity for postgraduates to discuss various issues in writing, or more broadly in research, with their peers. A workshop on expectations was chaired by PSTS committee member Richard Elliott, with Dr Nik Brown, a key figure in the sociology of expectations literature, as a discussant. In order to be as engaging and interactive as possible, the workshop was led by the participants themselves, who introduced their own understandings of and interests

in technoscientific expectations and promises. Participants were researching a variety of different fields, from cognitive enhancement to tissue engineering and stem cells, infertility treatment and disease prevention. Issues raised included the connection between new scientific developments and hope, the wedding of technologies to emotive stories and the lifecycle of patient advocacy groups. Whereas, other debates looked at technological determinism, the human need to always be moving forward and the 'bubbles' of expectation that surround innovations such as interspecies transplantation. Dr Brown helped to focus the discussion by touching on the infatuation of STS scholars with 'the new', the role of failure as a normative concept and institutional 'amnesia' as a 'marketing tool' to rebrand and recycle technologies and account for visions of past futures.

Feedback

The plenary speakers and other academics from ISS all commented on how impressed they were with the diversity and quality of the presentations which is testimony to the richness and excellence of postgraduate STS here in the UK and abroad. Comments from staff at ISS who were involved with PSTS included:

"I am really sorry that I could not spend more time at what was such a fantastic event - but I do want to congratulate everyone involved in this impressive achievement and to hope that we can find ways of sustaining it."

"I was there only for a couple of panels, but it was enough to see how excellent the level of the papers was, not to mention the organisation!"

"It was an exceptionally successful conference; with so much thought and hard work put into the planning and organisation all of which paid off exceedingly handsomely; an assembly of ferociously clever postgraduates; all coalescing in a terrific head of steam and enthusiasm for a conference next year and for sustaining a network."

We received feedback forms from approximately half of the conference participants. The committee received a great deal of positive feedback about the conference, as well as some things delegates would have liked to have seen done better or differently. The feedback forms commented on the professionalism and quality of the conference. The chance to meet other postgraduates doing similar work and to build networks was by far the most important aspect of the conference for those who attended. Participants enjoyed being able to present, discuss and get feedback on their research from other postgraduates and were positive about the informal, relaxed atmosphere of the conference, particularly the workshops.

"A great chance to meet other PGRs in similar fields of study"

"I've enjoyed it and got more out of it than any other conference I've been to."

"I found meeting other PG students, listening to their work and having a chance to chat with them most useful."

Most of the things that postgraduates thought could be changed or improved involved making the conference bigger and better (more and longer workshops; more social events; a longer conference; more food; better coffee!). Some

participants felt that the format of the parallel sessions – i.e. the chairing, the time for discussion; inability to attend some sessions – could be worked on. Some of those from outside the UK strongly felt that the focus should not just be UK STS.

“Involve more senior researchers to moderate the sessions, assess presentations and provide constructive criticism.”

“I think it would be an interesting experiment to move the conference outside the UK – perhaps next year is too early – but still!”

Strong support was indicated (both from the feedback forms and the public meeting) for continuing the conference in the following years and for developing a national network that will make future collaborations possible. There was a more mixed reaction to a PSTS website with some feeling that the website would be unnecessary, whilst others were enthusiastic.

“We NEED another one next year.”

“To me, the events should be the primary function. There is a danger in trying to establish a website which demands constant updating and new content...A website which has details of the conferences can be a great resource... Also consider a mailing list – it’s much easier to maintain and recipients don’t have to remember to visit.”

The Future of PSTS

This first event has helped spread the word around the UK that postgraduates in STS are beginning to build a network and we hope that you’ll have good words to say when people ask you about it. But more than that, we’d like to invite you to get involved with the running of the network and conference. Ultimately the future of PSTS is up to you, the members of the network. The 2009 conference committee will soon end their term and we need you to help move the network forward. Below is our proposed structure to ensure that the group and the conference continue to improve in a sustainable and democratic fashion.

We think that the group deserves proper organisation and thus propose the formation of a management board. That board would be responsible, at the top level, for the finances and direction of the network. Underneath the management board would be the network committee and the conference committee. These could change every year or two depending on the frequency of the conference and the workload of the website/newsletter.

PSTS Management Board

The management board could change over time as people come and go, it would be a democratic organisation with a voting system to ensure that the board is fairly operated. All those who are members of the PSTS network would have a vote. Most likely the board would be a mixture of postgraduates and recently qualified doctors who have been part of the conference committee or website editorial team, since those would be the most eligible candidates. The primary role of this group will be as a resource of experience, contacts and knowledge from which the committees below

could draw. It would also respond to the demands of the network and be responsible for drawing up future plans for its development and consolidation.

PSTS Conference Committee

We envisage the conference committee changing every year as the conference moves from one university to another. At the moment this is likely to be a rather undemocratic process as we try to ensure that the conference happens for the next couple of years and will mostly be based on which university is able to host the event at the time. In the future we hope that there will be increased capacity and interest in hosting the conference, and we will then be able to draw up a calendar of hosts, who will have more time to arrange their committee and finance the event (in coordination with the Board and present committee). We might also be able to consider dual hosts.

PSTS Network/Website Committee

The network is a group of postgraduates and possibly early career fellows. Members will receive a monthly email newsletter, the compilation of which will be the primary responsibility of the network committee. They will also be responsible for the maintenance of the website, in whatever form that takes. For the near future this will likely be a limited resource but we hope to expand its capacity in the future, depending of course on the demand from the network and on the available resources (time and money). This role is likely to be held for varying periods depending upon the person's availability but we expect that a commitment of 1 year will be required to take up the position.

If you are interested in getting involved in running PSTS please email us at board@psts.org.uk saying what you would be interested in doing. We particularly need people to work on the newsletter and website, if these sections are to go ahead.