Report on A-UK Webinar

AsSIST-UK ran its first virtual Webinar on 18th June 2020, entitled 'STIS in a post-COVID-19 world', with five speakers from across the UK membership, with over 80 attendees online. Our speakers were Eva Giraud (Keele University), Michael Schillmeier (University of Exeter), Anni Wilkinson (IDS Sussex), Reiner Grundmann (University of Nottingham) and Andy Stirling (University of Sussex). The aim of the meeting was to explore how Science, Technology and Innovation Studies (STIS) can contribute towards our understanding of the pandemic and future possibilities. The meeting was chaired by Robin Williams (A-UK Chair).

The full agenda for the event can be found here: https://assist-uk.com/assist-uk-webinar/ and the recording here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MattzeH8MWA.

In this report, we provide a brief summary of the five talks, the questions raised by attendees and a listing of current work in related areas being pursued by those who attended the meeting.

The purpose of the Webinar was to bring together those currently researching and commenting on the pandemic from within the STIS community to discuss how their work opens up important but often ignored issues relating to our understanding of COVID-19. Policy and media debate focuses primarily on managing (albeit often lacking clarity and transparency) the current challenge, whereas we should be concerned to think also about more fundamental issues – such as reimagining human/non-human relations – and how we might recalibrate our relationship to nature, how we need to rethink the sort pf knowledges we can draw on to do so, and what will be required in the future to make for a more secure and stable world. Our speakers provided excellent commentaries that addressed these areas of concern.

The Presentations

The meeting was divided into two sessions, the first entitled *'Pandemics, entanglements and responses*'. Our first speaker was **Eva Giraud,** Senior Lecturer from the Department of Media Communications and Creative Practice at Keele University. Eva's talk, 'After the "Age of Wreckers and Exterminators', explored the narrative of extermination and eradication to create a distance between humans and other harmful life forms. In many ways, public health programmes historically have been designed to do this – in, for example, DDT programmes to eradicate mosquitos and bed-bugs. Eva asked how we can understand the ethical implications of this narrative today in the context of the pandemic, and in particular how a different perspective based on disentanglement between species might open up new ways of thinking and practice and how to intervene in entanglements (see her recent book at - https://www.dukeupress.edu/what-comes-after-entanglement) . She argued that there are two key issues here: first, the loss of species, and the counterpoint growth of other species, and secondly, whether and who can choose to be entangled or not in different life forms, reflecting the social and cultural inequalities in different regions.

In regard to the first, Eva referred to her joint paper with colleagues (see https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038026119830907) on the different entanglements between humans and three different life forms: bed bugs, AntiMicrobial Resistance (AMR), and hook worms. She showed how previous attempts to exterminate these have failed and so how we need to consider living alongside these (and other, perhaps harmful) species, and how different societal groups may be more, or less, likely to be subject to the health risks of doing so: for example, how refugees are much more like to experience AMR than others. These differences pose a range of ethical and political challenges to coping with entanglement/dis-entanglement, especially in regard

to considering who might be forced to live alongside harmful forms of life compared with others who are not.

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated new agenda about rethinking our relationship with the natural world, the environment and living with other species, beyond and other to the narrative of extermination. We need to understand how distance and detachment and the social framing of dis/entanglements can help us looking forward beyond the current pandemic.

Our second speaker was **Michael Schillmeier**, Professor of Sociology at the University of Exeter, whose presentation was on 'Counter/Infections.' Michael's recent paper (https://mh.bmj.com/content/45/2/141), nicely linked to Eva's presentation inasmuch as he is interested in discourse surrounding the pandemic and that one of his foci was on how socially disadvantaged groups, notably the disabled, are coping with CovidV-19. Rather than frame the future as a *post*-Covid world, we may need to think about living with a new Covid world. Michael has had prior experience working on the SARS pandemic in 2003, and while many focus on the uncertainties of pandemics, he argued there are four certainties we know: new pandemics will always arrive; disadvantaged groups – such as migrant cheap labour – are always more vulnerable; all countries are badly prepared despite previous experience, though some (not necessarily rich states) are dealing with it better than others. He described the pandemic as a 'cosmopolitical event' where a non-human actor disrupts social and political relations and practices.

Michael drew a very interesting comparison between viruses and humans: humans and viruses are both 'robbers' or thieves, taking from the environment those things they need to survive; both have the ability to change and are mobile and take life from others in order to be stable. This 'environmental robbery' needs to be justified: the pandemic requires of human society to justify and rethink its relation to the environment and each other. In other words the question of infection and counter-infection is a question of societal values and how we live with others.

Our third speaker was **Annie Wilkinson**, Research Fellow in anthropology and health systems research at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex**,** whose talk was entitled' Social science in epidemic response: engaging with social dimensions'. As social phenomena, epidemics spread through the social fabric – carers, doctors, and others – with unequal vulnerabilities. Control recommendations are often anti-social – isolation, non-contact, distancing from friends and relatives – and responses, especially in terms of control, have hit marginal groups more than others and distributed blame and stigma unevenly. Tensions between external expertise and local knowledge, disciplinary hierarchies favouring biomedical knowledge to the exclusion of social science are commonplace.

Annie's experience in regards to the Ebola pandemic was instructive (see https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/social-science-lessons-learned-from-ebola-epidemics-evidence-summary/): initially local hostility to the response to the virus by external agencies led her and colleagues to establish a new anthropological network to reshape the response and better understand local cultures and practices of care. This work has created an anthropological platform to build rapid-response social science, which is now drawn on to inform policy. Some examples include briefings, collecting data and analysis of community feedback, high-level engagement such as on WHO committees, as well as advocacy and fund-raising. There is now a shared understanding within policy at a national and international level of the theoretical and operational contribution that social science can make in this area.

Q&A session

The questions that were raised related to:

- The role of non-human animals in pandemic disease and forms of control;
- Different forms of socio-technical barriers – masks, quarantine, vaccines etc., their different spatio-temporal forms and tensions between them;
- How to avoid some types of knowledge dominating – who is in disciplinary control;
- Whether humans and viruses are similar thieves in terms of their ability to survive;
- Why STS seems to be largely absent or marginalised from the debate about the pandemic;

Please listen to the Q&A and answers via the YouTube video.

Session 2 was devoted to the theme of *Control. Expertise and Uncertainties*.

Our first speaker was **Reiner Grundmann**, Professor of Science and Technology Studies at the University of Nottingham. Reiner's talk was entitled 'Covid-19: Science and Expertise'. Reiner asked who is defining the pandemic and on what basis? His discussion is inspired by Daston's notion of 'ground-zero empiricism': that is there are few things we know for certain but many uncertainties and there is a temptation to apply existing frameworks without asking if they are relevant. He also drew on Jasanoff's notion of civic epistemology and questioned how and on what basis knowledge and expertise is given authority and legitimacy in different socio-political cultures. In the UK, expert knowledge is made legitimate through limited public consultation, failure to admit error, improvisation, and use of cost-benefit analysis through a closed, top-down process (as SAGE) with a very narrow disciplinary base.

Reiner argued that the UK government provides very little explanation about its decisions. When the government argues it is guided by the science it is principally via modelling rather than (often inconvenient) data. Expertise is different from science based on specific values and assumptions, selecting information and proposing courses of action and policy (see his paper https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11024-016-9308-7). Two scenarios are currently in play. The first is that Covid-19 cannot be contained so it is best to mitigate it (to protect the NHS from being over-run); the second is that the UK has a high R rate so contain via testing and tracing, so eradication is the ultimate goal. This shows how different judgements are made and that may not be commensurable. At the same time, the UK Prime Minster has deployed the language of 'common sense' and so what Reiner called a populist epistemology. Reiner's talk demonstrates the diverse forms of knowledge and their form of legitimacy and how these have shaped the discourse and policy responses to CV-19.

Our final speaker, **Andy Stirling**, Professor of Science and Technology Studies at the Science Policy Research Unity (SPRU), Sussex, presented on 'What can STS approaches help society learn from this pandemic?'. Andy has recently published a blog called 'Modernity Without its Clothes' (https://steps-centre.org/blog/modernity-without-its-clothes-the-pandemic-crisis-shines-a-light-on-futilities-of-control/) and his talk built on the ideas developed there. He argued that there are many debates circulating about what the pandemic means, ranging across issues including de-globalisation, resilience, reversing capitalism, and so on that pivot the pandemic and no cause is 'too minor or partisan' to be excluded. STS in particular has been prone to 'salon-style' discussions, introspective often, reflecting too little on how we give momentum to ideas like the Anthropocene, which may be drawn on and mobilised by 'ominous forces in the world'. Nevertheless, STS is uniquely placed to engage the pandemic and its narratives, especially in terms of rethinking modernity in a globalised context and that the former is constituted on 'fictions' of control. It is clear

he argued that the imaginations of control have been refuted: the categories, the numbers, the futures, the risks, etc., anchored in modernist notions of control during the pandemic and appearing in policy settings and the press, are now unsettled.

Andy then discussed how modernity is imagined in the social sciences, encompassing powerful ideas about individualism, rationalism, the scientific method, nation-forming, democratisation, industrialisation and so on. In different ways they presume control – of action, over nature, control over politics, labour and so on – a 'metastasising of control' in modernity. These are pretences of control that maintain, enact and legitimate power and privilege.

The lessons we can draw from this are that we should embrace humility rather than hubris, hope rather than fear about what is possible, equality not superiority, and flourishing rather than growth, and care rather than control. The pandemic has left modernity without its clothes. So we should see STS has having an opportunity to think about the open-endedness and opportunities for the future.

Q&A session

The questions raised at the second Q&A session related to:

- What is the role played by expertise *of* expertise;
- Whether the 'ground zero' notion conflicts with the notion of pandemics as social phenomena;
- How do the notions of entanglements/dis-entanglement relate to questions of 'control' and how might we live with Covid.

Current work (in alphabetical order) by A-UK members and others relating to the pandemic.

Among those joining the Webinar over twenty are currently working on or planning to begin to research issues relating to the pandemic. We asked them to send in a brief note about their work, and a list of topics received so far appears below (We will add any additional ones when they come in). We hope that this will prove useful to them and others interested in research elsewhere and so possibilities for collaboration. There is for example, quite a few projects using a comparative approach.

Camille Bellet (Liverpool: Camille.Bellet@liverpool.ac.uk) ' My research focuses on public health and the science and practice of animal health care in industrial farming. My current research is not focussing on COVID-19, but I'm interested in identifying colleagues/potential collaborators who have an interest in looking at COVID-19 from the perspective of human-animal relations. This is because I'll be starting a Wellcome Trust Fellowship in September at CHSTM, University of Manchester on digital sensing and the reorganisation of animal health care in cattle farming in the UK and France. I anticipate that the implications of COVID-19 for farm technologies, animal care, and human-animal relations will naturally emerge as a topic as I start my research.

Anna Dowrick (Queen Mary UL: a.dowrick@qmul.ac.uk) is involved in a project led by the UCL Rapid Research and Evaluation Lab (RREAL) exploring healthcare workers experiences of the pandemic in 10 country settings. In the UK, this has involved examining how hospital care has been reorganised due to infection control measures. Of interest to the AsSIST-UK community might be our exploration of the affective labour of the healthcare response to the pandemic, specifically how the pandemic disrupted usual relations of care and the work of reconfiguring it around infection control protocols.

Natalie Hammond (MMU: N.Hammond@mmu.ac.uk) and colleagues ran a survey about sexual and reproductive health during lock down. On the STS side we asked questions about self-testing technologies and tele-health as well as changes in relation to digital sexual practices.

Michael Hopkins (SPRU/Sussex: m.m.hopkins@sussex.ac.uk) is working with colleagues (Choon Key Chekar, Stuart Hogarth, Josh Moon) on understanding and comparison of Covid 19 diagnostic testing systems, their design and shaping, strengths and weaknesses, including the role played by transnational actors. We are studying the four nations of the U.K., Germany, Ireland, Spain, South Korea, and South Africa

Richard Milne (Wellcome Genome Campus/Cambridge: richard.milne@wgc.org.uk) is exploring Covid-19 in 3 areas: older adult's engagement with novel diagnostic and health monitoring technologies in the context of infectious and non-communicable diseases; the elaboration of post-Covid futures for digital health, as related to disease detection, diagnosis and monitoring; and finally an interest in the re-orientation of genomic architectures and technologies towards host/pathogen interactions in response to the pandemic.

Brigitte Nerlich (Nottingham: Brigitte.Nerlich@nottingham.ac.uk) is working on the social and cultural impact of Covid-19, focussing on metaphors, images and symbols in particular. She has written a number of blog posts about the matter and is currently co-editing a special issue of the journal 'Metaphor and Symbol'. See: https://wakelet.com/wake/201b93ed-5f55-46c0-9148-26cb11c4c812 and https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/makingsciencepublic/2020/06/03/cfp-covid-19-and-metaphors-special-issue/

Cian O'Donovan (UCL: c.o'donovan@ucl.ac.uk) is working on innovation policy in the social care sector, in particular robotics and autonomous systems in care for the elderly.

Warren Pearce (Sheffield: warren.pearce@sheffield.ac.uk) is currently researching the production and use of science advice in the pandemic, and growing demands for different kinds of expertise through digital platforms.

Matjaz Vidmar (Edinburgh: matjaz.vidmar@ed.ac.uk) is examining technological and organisational innovation in the development of strategic resilience to challenges, both current (Covid-19) as well as persistent (sustainable development). He is focusing in particular on synergies between data-intensive R&D, mainly in the Space Industry, and use of data for public engagement, futures literacy and participatory citizen empowerment.

More info about Matjaz and his work: www.roe.ac.uk/~vidmar

Robin Williams (Edinburgh: R.Williams@ed.ac.uk) is looking at how digital infrastructure has been applied to allow NHS trusts to respond to the challenge of the covid pandemic and to support major changes in how health care is delivered in the new normal with endemic covid (e.g. through remote consultation).

James Wilsdon (Sheffield: j.wilsdon@sheffield.ac.uk) has three projects underway: 1) Through the Research on Research Institute, we're working with our consortium of international partners (see: http://researchonresearch.org/announcement-partners-projects) to explore post-pandemic research policies and priorities, and the extent to which immediate and urgent responses to Covid-19 will have longer-term effects on research systems, cultures and decision-making. Beyond these initial responses (often directed towards vaccine development, therapeutics etc.) will there be a wider focus on pandemic and other areas of preparedness, and will we see the so-called "covidisation" of research funding on a larger scale?

2) Through the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), I'm part of a distributed global team tracking and analysing policy responses to Covid-19, and the evidence and advice used to justify these, in over 90 countries worldwide. This is being recorded in an INGSA Covid-19 Policymaking Tracker (see: https://www.ingsa.org/covid/policymaking-tracker/) and will form the basis of a series of online workshops in mid-September 2020 https://www.ingsa.org/ingsa2020/.

3) Jack Stilgoe (UCL) and I are also acting as the UK arm of a 12-country "Comparative Study of Expertise for Policy in the COVID-19 Pandemic", an NSF-funded project led by Sheila Jasanoff (Harvard) and Stephen Hilgartner (Cornell) - see http://sts.cornell.edu/now-accepting-applications-postdoctoral-research-position-focused-knowledge-policy-process-regarding