15th Annual STS Conference Graz 2016

Conference 15TH ANNUAL STS CONFERENCE GRAZ 2016,
GRAZ, AUSTRIA, 9–10 MAY 2016

Reviewed by **Erik Stengler**

Abstract Celebrating 15 years of success and growth, the STS Conference Graz on May 9 and 10, 2016, gathered nearly 200 delegates from all over the world who had the opportunity to discuss and share research and experiences on 6 main themes: Policy and Technology; Gender and Queer STS; Mobility, Energy and Sustainability; Responsible Research and Innovation Studies; Nutrition, Health and Biomedicine; and Information and Communication Technologies, Surveillance and Society.

Keywords Participation and science governance; Public engagement with science and technology; Science and policy-making

In its 15th edition, the annual STS Conference in Graz comprised six thematic streams, which were delivered over two days, on May 9 and 10. The number of accepted contributions required five parallel sessions, framed by four plenary keynote presentations at the beginning and the end of each of the two days.

The first keynote by Heather Laube from the University of Michigan set the scene for the stream entitled *Gender and Queer STS*. She pointed out that current boundaries in Academia are not a problem of individuals but of the institutions and structures, including the actual buildings: one interviewee of her recent work on this issue found it hard to find a female toilet near the engineering labs.

The stream on *Mobility, Energy and Sustainability* also had a plenary keynote, in which Daniel Hinkeldein, from innovation centre InnoZ, Germany, presented an insight into current developments regarding mobility in cities, proposing that effective change can only be truly achieved by changing the discourse (the leitmotiv) regarding clean transport options. These need to be made trendy, on the basis that such choices are a social construct that can be influenced in this way. This was illustrated with the example of an unnamed city of Germany with strong automotive industry, which delegates could however easily identify.

Policy and Technology and *Responsible Research and Innovation Studies* were addressed in two streams and a keynote by Ingo Schulz-Schaeffer, from the Technical University of Berlin, who looked into situational scenarios in Engineers' labs and how the imagined future shapes or influences their work.

The last keynote by Maria Rentetzi from the National Technical University of Athens wrapped up the stream on *Nutrition, Health, and Biomedicine* addressing the changing standards and growing concerns about radiation protection, suggesting that STS should take a stronger leading role in promoting clarity of a radiation risk and safety culture on the basis of the historical, socio-political, economic, and cross-national contexts.

Within this stream also other areas with contentious societal issues were addressed, such as data sharing and storing in the context of Genetics (Simone Schumann, from Open Science, Vienna) and Biobanks in general (Melanie Goisauf, Life Science Governance Institute, Vienna). On the basis that such controversies can be turned into an essential learning tool, they presented Public Engagement efforts of two European projects in these two areas, and it became clear how in both approaches the focus was on public participation in what was branded as "mutual learning" and "knowledge sharing", respectively. Two further presentations highlighted how such participatory efforts are not yet widespread, and still very limited, as in the case of the biomedical engineering sector in Japan (Susanne Brucksch, Free University of Berlin), where policies are set by all stakeholders except patients, with a lack of transparency and accountability which was also reported for the case of the Xenotransplantation debate at the turn of the millennium (Erich Griessler, Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna).

Within the stream devoted to Information and *Communication Technologies, Surveillance and Society*, one double-session addressed robotics and various attempts to assess the impact of their growing presence in society. "Social robots" was the buzzword. A common thread across the various presentations was the difficulty of putting social interactions of robots to test in realistic contexts. Martin Mesiter, from the University of Duisburg-Essen, presented a study performed on how social interactions and roles in a family were altered by the presence of a simple robotic vacuum cleaner.

However, going beyond already commercialised technology and testing future developments is proving very difficult, often due to the legal limitations of exposing unaware citizens to fully autonomous devices. This is leading to only remotely controlled experiments being viable, as reported to be the case in Austria by Astrid Weiss from the Vienna University of Technology. In Japan, however, where an harmonious (ethical and safe) relationship is presumed, rather than legislated, limitations to the testing come rather from liability issues and the question of the validity of the experiments as such, for example regarding the causal chain in the context of machines that learn, as reported by Hironori Matsuzaki, from the University of Oldenburg in Germany. Other societal issues behind the success story of ground-breaking humanoid search and rescue robots in South Korea were presented by Heesung Chin from KAIST.

The presentation by one of the session convenors, Andreas Bischof, gave an overview of a suggested typology of "every day robotics" from the point of view of an epistemological genealogy, alluding to science-fiction as a "hidden curriculum" in the field and thus linking back to the presentation by Diego Compagna, from the Technical University of Berlin, who opened the session and highlighted how fiction movies on robotics can actually help overcome the limitations and difficulties in testing social interactions of robots, by using the depicted imagined scenarios as an expression of society's fears and hopes.

Still within the "technological" stream, another double-session on the role webvideos in science and research communication, hosted by Joachim Allgeier and Andrea Geipel, gathered a varied range of participants from different countries and backgrounds.

The internet as a source of medical information was addressed by communication science expert Ezter Nádasi from the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, in the context of the contents on assisted reproductive technologies; filmmaker and artist in residence of the Earth Observatory of Singapore Isaac Kerlow shared his inspiring experience in making webvideos for a research institute; and the delegates were then made part of a philosophical experiment by Mersolis Schöne and Joel Szonn, from the University of Vienna, in which videos were not only meant to communicate knowledge but to create it as well.

Two presentations by Núria Saladié (Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona) with Alicia de Lara (Miguel Hernandez University of Elche, Spain) and by Erik Stengler (University of the West of England, Bristol) on quantitative and qualitative analyses of webvideos as a science communication tool, brought up an interesting and far-reaching discussion on how and by whom are webvideos defined to be scientific: is it the users, the platforms and search engines, or those who make them? A question with no easy answer, with implications regarding the sampling for this kind of studies but also regarding the proliferation of often dangerous and harmful pseudo-scientific information over the internet, which was then further discussed in coffee breaks and on the way to the event's social evening, on the picturesque hill of Rosenberg, where the conference came to a memorable close.

Author

Erik Stengler is Senior Lecturer in Science Communication. His special interests in this area include Science Museums and Planetariums, Science in Film and, more broadly, how to succeed in communicating science to those not particularly interested in it.
He has extensive experience in Communicating Science informally in Science Centres, through Outreach Projects and in the Media. He has been project manager of various initiatives that range from a Science Van to Courses on Science in the Movies, including a TV children's show; theatre plays; science programmes for senior citizens, in prisons or in leisure environments; and educational partnerships with Science Historians.
Erik has been involved in the training of museum explainers and in various teacher training programmes. E-mail: erik.stengler@uwe.ac.uk.

How to cite

Stengler, E. (2016). '15th Annual STS Conference Graz 2016'. *JCOM* 15 (04), R02.

ISSN 1824 – 2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. http://jcom.sissa.it/.