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On Necropolitics & Science Communication in 2020

PCST Webinar 30.7.20, Dr. Emily Dawson, @emilyadawson, Emily.dawson@ucl.ac.uk

1. Intro slide, thank you for having me.
 - a. The thought that I've had on a loop for the past few months is the horror that the exclusive, inequitable failings of the multidiscipline we call science communication has demonstrable implications for life and death on a mass scale.
 - b. To have said in a previous year that social justice in science communication was a matter of life and death would have had me accused of hyperbole, but this year it seems to me the inescapable conclusion of the world we are living in.
 - c. So today I will try to explain how thinking about our field of work in terms of what Achille Mbembe called Necropolitics seems not only fitting, but if it is not a call to action then I have no idea what else people need to see, read, hear or think in order to support field wide change.

2. I hear these refrains about normality a lot, as I'm sure many of you do too & I wanted to start by turning to think about what normal might mean for science communication and the broader context in which we all live and work.
 - a. So far, since April 5 of 'my' people have died, a 6th & 7th are on the cusp and yet this seems tiny in comparison to a colleague for whom 110 people have died. There are many similarities and differences between my colleague & I, but perhaps most notably for these numbers & the broader context of such numbers, she is from an Afro-Caribbean background, while I am from a mixed European background.
 - b. While in classes before 2020 I described some of the structural inequalities that have so visibly intersected in 2020 through talking about the racism & sexism demonstrated by maternal mortality rates, from now on I imagine we will point to the pandemic stats instead.
 - c. Similarly where I have taught about racist bias in algorithms and state surveillance, incarceration statistics and border-crossing mortality numbers, the state violence in response to Black Lives Matter civil rights movements in the US and beyond will serve as a further chilling illustration. And I don't want more examples.
 - d. 2020 is, from these perspectives, the same as much as it is different, part of a normal I suggest we try not to return to
 - e. These stories are, in some senses, a microcosm of the larger picture in which, I will argue today, Science Communication plays its own roles. Roles, which I will suggest, might be seen as part & parcel of the reproduction of structural inequalities.

3. What does it mean in our societies to be outside what Nirmal Puwar calls the "somatic norm" of the public or citizenry, that is, to find your body doesn't fit,

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- your practices and knowledges are marked as deficient, that in other words, you don't count.
- a. And what is the most extreme version of being outside these 'somatic norms', the most extreme versions of not counting? Well, many scholars argue, we could think of it as death.
 - b. So from work in North American Black Studies scholars such as Saidiya Hartman have written about this state of being as a form of social death, as experiences of racism with roots in the Transatlantic slave trade, which in her turn Katherine McKittrick describes as the "mathematics of Black life", life structured, for these scholars in north America, through the lens of death.
 - c. Further afield, Achille Mbembe's argues that what he terms "necropolitics" is precisely about how certain bodies or groups are devalued to the point of death
4. Now, For Achille Mbembe, necropolitics is a description of how power operates, with, in much of his work, a focus on war, colonialism and terror.
- a. In my pre-2020 readings of his work I had found much to think about but had not linked these ideas to science communication,
 - b. But since the pandemic was announced on March 11th by the WHO, and the ensuing data sets about which families, communities, cities and countries were worst affected, I was kept thinking that science communication was, at this time, very clearly implicated in the machinery of necropolitics, in the politics of who, in Mbembe's words (2019, p. 80) "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not.". In other words, who gets ill, who recovers and who dies.
5. What does this mean in the context of my research? This is a current screenshot from the UK Office of National statistics webpage to set the scene because there are three main strands to I think about most here:
- a. First, lets think about science and society relationships. In years that were not 2020 I typically have to justify my attention to science and how inclusions and exclusions around science work. Long arguments about why science is an extremely salient part of contemporary societies, political in both a small 'p' and capital "P" sense have been needed. Well, no more. The pandemic has made science of central concern to all. No more do we need to patiently explain why it is important to be able to access scientific information, to be able to judge it, laugh at it, critique it, add to it, work with it, use it or reject it, to be able to see how it is politicised and who is using it.
 - b. Second, lets think about social justice as it relates to those science & society relationships. Again, justifying why science and society relationships ought to be understood as deeply political, often hegemonic and assimilationist in their commitment to reinforcing patterns of power has been part of my work. That Black Lives Matter civil rights protests

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were held in many countries in 2020 alongside the horrifying statistics demonstrating how racism and class discrimination intersect in COVID 19 morbidity and mortality surely answer the question “why is social justice important for science and society relationships”.

- c. Third, as I argued in an Ecsite webinar in May, the patterns of which communities are worst affected by COVID 19 and which are least supported by Science Communication either as audiences, users, visitors, contributors or practitioners speaks volumes.
 - i. *It says to me* that we cannot escape that science communication practices are enmeshed with life and death situations around the world.
 - ii. *It says to me* that the structural inequalities that shape our societies as well as science communication practices mean that those who arguably might benefit most from equitable science communication practices are those the field has worked least with.
 - iii. *It says to me* that we *must* take responsibility for the roles this sector plays in the broader world, and that that means change.
6. So where does this leave us? I suggest it leaves us to reconsider the driving motivations of this messy multidiscipline, this umbrella term field of different practices, institutions and stakeholders.
 - a. What does it mean to take social justice seriously in science communication? I suggest it means being extremely averse to returning to “normal”, and amidst the mess, to think about how we support socially inclusive change, how we create support & resilience for staff and audiences, esp. the most vulnerable, as well as researchers and funders
 - b. How might we draw on the work of people like Sylvia Wynter or Walter Dignolo to think about valuing, recognizing and honoring people who, within & beyond science communication have been made to not count?
 - c. What might it mean to use this moment to overhaul and transform practice when there are so many moving pieces to this, the complexity, the dramatic, rapid & multiple changes
 - d. How can we think about navigating these complexities in thinking differently about ‘mainstream’ science communication and how we understand science & society relationships? What could this mean for institutions, for teams, for projects, for individual humans?
7. In my work I look to science communication leaders in practice and research, people like the wonderful team in this webinar, Luisa, Noni, Andrés, but also, as you can see on the screen Elizabeth Rasekoala on my left, Sara Wajid on my right, as well as Subhadra Das, Miranda Lowe, Vanessa Mignan, Summer Finlay, Lindy Orthia, Sujatha Rahman. Liz Neeley, Luz Helena Oviedo, Claudia Aguirre, Barbara Streicher, Sunshine Menezes, Erinma Ochu, Anita Shervington, Lewis Hou & Hana Ayoob, and, of course, many more, whose insightful critiques,

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practices, constructive alliance building and inclusive leadership rejuvenates me when I have my attacks of feeling too fed up.

- a. From thinking about their work as well as my own experiences, it seems clear to me that the world is full of amazing inclusive science communication practices, but that many of these fall outside the relatively narrow lens of 'what counts and who counts' for mainstream science communication, particularly as it is configured in the Global North,
 - b. So to that end I suggest that one of the most useful things we might all do is to think about how to constructively build mutually beneficial (not extractive) relationships within & beyond our communities to work out *all* the different possibilities for meaningfully inclusive science communication.
 - c. As my colleague Dr. Uma Patel argues, there is not one story or one answer to these questions.
8. Unless we want to remain complicit in countless more deaths to come, I suggest we do this in a hurry, so I leave you with a quote from Grace Lee Boggs, US civil rights activist "A revolution that is based on people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the greatest contributions of humankind"

Thank you very much for listening.

References: *(I've fleshed this out in hopes of being helpful, it is not a full inclusive science communication reading list by any means, nor perfectly formatted, just the things I was thinking about when working on this talk)*

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