

CGHE Annual Conference
24-25 May 2022: Session details



Science in the public eye: communicating and debating research findings in real time in a global public health crisis

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Trish Greenhalgh, University of Oxford

Science is a social act. It takes place in a social, cultural and political context in which particular questions are deemed worth pursuing and other questions are deprioritised or never asked. When the pandemic broke, the scientific community rapidly repurposed its infrastructure and resources to build the evidence base about the nature, spread, diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19. These efforts were shaped and constrained by particular research traditions and scientific practices—and by entrenched regimes of truth linked to hard-won hierarchies of power and influence. Scientists became swept up in the pressure and pace of COVID-19 research and in the increasingly acrimonious debates playing out in both academic and lay media about which (and whose) evidence represented the truth. Post-normal science rapidly morphed from a fringe interest of sociologists of science to become an uncomfortable new reality for university academics who had up to now enjoyed their ivory-tower world. This lecture will use one worked example—the contested field of research on public masking—to illustrate some theoretical ideas about science and science communication in these post-normal times. It will explore why, more than two years into the pandemic and with hundreds of published studies, some scientists still believe there is “no evidence” that masks work while others view the efficacy of masking as a well-established “fact”—and why debates between the different “camps” of scientists played out so prominently in the public sphere. I will draw briefly on the work of critical social scientists such as Latour, Bourdieu and Foucault, and philosophers of science including Kuhn and the pragmatists.

Trish Greenhalgh is Professor of Primary Care Health Sciences and Director of the Interdisciplinary Research in Health Sciences research group at the University of Oxford. She studied Medical, Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge and Clinical Medicine at Oxford before training first as a diabetologist and later as an academic general practitioner. She has a doctorate in laboratory science, an MBA in Higher Education Management and four honorary doctorates. She leads a programme of research at the interface between medicine, the social sciences and philosophy. She has brought this interdisciplinary perspective to bear on the research response to the Covid-19 pandemic, looking at diverse themes including remote clinical assessment of the deteriorating patient, the science and anthropology of masking for the lay public, and policy decision-making at times of crisis. Trish is the author of over 400 peer-reviewed publications and 16 textbooks. She holds various national and international advisory appointments and is a member of Independent SAGE. She is active on Twitter [@trishgreenhalgh](https://twitter.com/trishgreenhalgh).