

Dr John Troyer
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The Research

John's research focus is on the inter-relationships between death, dying, the dead body and science and technology. He tackles a range of bioethical issues such as: what happens to someone's dead body after they've died; and when the law defines the moment of death. A good deal of his science and technology research examines dead body disposal technologies. He also works on the history of death and representations of death and dead bodies in art, architecture, monuments, and memorials.

The Engagement:

The key 'publics': General public, cemetery staff, school groups, museums.

The type of engagement: Informing these 'publics' about his research and in some cases, collaborating with them to develop research projects.

When approaching public engagement work, John uses those mediums best matched to his research topic and the aims he's looking to achieve. His work around assisted dying and organ donation involves thinking that he's keen to disseminate to as wide an audience as possible and so mass media (in particular, radio and television) are his preferred channels. Compare this with his research on the history of science and its relation to death, dying and the dead body which appeals to narrower audiences; this work, John usually reserves for museum audiences. He has found though that schools are interested in the full gamut of his research:

"Young people are just generally interested in my research field so when I go into schools, I'm often given free rein to talk about any or all of my work."

Through media, schools and museums work, **John is looking to inform and inspire his audiences** but he also works with 'publics' in other ways. At present, he is collaborating with **Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust** and **Calling the Shots** digital media company on the *Future Cemetery* project. The project is trialling new user technologies in cemetery spaces (e.g. a smartphone app that takes you on a tour of the cemetery). This is the first time that John has worked with these partners and he has found the experience wholly positive.

"My partners are innovative, creative and forward-thinking and so have provided an ideal testing ground for new ideas and concepts for 21st century cemeteries. The partnership has proved extremely fruitful and we're looking at ways of working with one another into the future."

There is no doubt that serendipity has a role to play in effective collaborations, in finding the right partners with the right approach at the right time.

The Motivation:

For John, a **key motivation to engage is the opportunity to discuss with others what he's working on and in so doing, to develop new insights, thoughts and ideas.** In particular, he's found that engaging with a range of people on the topic of assisted dying has helped inform his thoughts in this area.

Further, in preparing for media interviews, John has to ensure clarity of thought to his arguments:

"When faced with a rigorous interviewer, it really makes you raise your game and ensure that you've thought through questions, ethical conundrums and the like. I've become a more thoughtful engager through my media experiences."

The Professional Development:

With over five years' experience of public engagement under his belt, John is increasingly finding that he's reaping the rewards, particularly in terms of **developing a wider network of contacts and advocates.** For example, he gave a talk to an audience at University College, London, in 2010 which included, unbeknownst to him, the assistant curator for the British Museum. Flash forward to 2013, and that curator has invited John to give a talk at the British Museum, a rare and special opportunity.

Increasingly, John is finding that people are approaching him with ideas and opportunities having been signposted by those that have seen him speak. In this way, John's professional reputation has grown and new research opportunities have emerged. All this from activity that he simply enjoys doing – speaking to others about his research.

"Know your audience – there's different ways to present the same piece of research. It's important to understand who the audience is, to keep that in mind, so that you can pitch it right."



Dr John Troyer speaking in a Social Studies of Death class at the School of the Future in New York City, May 2011.

"You never know who's in the audience; there could be a contact that will end up partnering or funding you in your next research venture."

The Learning:

One of John's undergraduate degrees is in theatre; in the type of engagement activities that he undertakes he more often than not draws upon his live performance background. Yet despite the confidence that comes from this background, John has had to be sensitive towards audiences. Whilst talking about dying, death and dead bodies is a daily occurrence for him, for some members of his audiences this topic matter could prove overwhelming, so he is incisive as to reception.

Careful thought about, and reactions to, his audiences is important:

"I've learnt to think carefully about the type of audience I want my research to be in front of. Because I think that my research could help a lot of people, I'm usually aiming for a mass audience."

Time management can become an issue for John, trying to balance his public engagement activities with teaching and research pressures. He feels this simply comes down to prioritising and being relaxed enough to say 'no' to some opportunities, even those that you'd really like to do.

Top tip:

"If you're starting out in public engagement, make sure that you really want to do it. Start with a topic that excites you and an engagement activity that you're comfortable with. Challenging yourself can come later!"