



UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies,
University of Hyderabad

Vulnerability Studies Network

Art, Representation & the Microbial World: A Roundtable in the Medical/Health Humanities

JAN 8, 2025 | 4 PM IST

Link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/92803900932?pwd=a0RTZnVHNXdTUlSdEZJbmVqaFNvZz09>

While Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich argue that the idiomatic value of the “modest microbe” has shifted from peril to promise, allowing us the opportunity to think of and with microbial communities (2014), the discourse around microbes veers between resistance and productive acceptance. In a world that acknowledges pandemic reality, antimicrobial resistance and the human microbiome, engaging with popular and scientific representations of microbes can help us uncover the entanglements between interdependent individuals, populations and species, replacing the notion of independent bounded selves. Representations of microbial lives and societies in the public sphere might draw from some or all of these: socio-medical discourses of diseases such as germ theory (as studied, for instance, by Otis, 1999); representational conventions, such as the metaphor of illness as war (eg. Sontag, 1978 or more recently Servitje, 2021) or the scaling up of microbial lives (eg. Belling 2003, Squier 2021); and can have functional values, such as risk communication or health activism that relies on the notion of collective responsibility. Undoubtedly then, the entanglement consists of not just the microbes themselves, but an ecosystem whose actants range from scientists and disadvantaged populations to laboratories and ‘vibrant matter’ (Bennett, 2010).

This roundtable will investigate how art, when instrumentalised specifically for public health communication about microbes, represents the leaky boundaries between the individual and society. Bringing together artists, science communicators and scholars working around representation and microbes, the roundtable aligns with larger goals of the health humanities to study the influence of medical and scientific practices on society by reflecting on the enterprise of communicating the vagaries of microbial lives to the public.

Convenor: Meenakshi Srihari, Sai University
Vulnerability Studies Network, UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies

Speakers

Dr. Somdatta Karak, Centre for Cellular & Molecular Biology, Hyderabad

Somdatta Karak is a life scientist turned science communicator. Her work focuses on making complex and abstract sciences accessible to general public, especially the younger audience. She co-leads Superheroes against Superbugs, an educational and public engagement initiative on antimicrobial resistance in India, and SciCity Hyderabad, a forum to bring science to cultural conversations of the city



Art for Complex Health Discussions

Sara Kenney, Graphic Novelist, Writer and Game Designer

Sara has 25+ years' experience working in science engagement through TV, animation, comics and immersive media. Sara wrote Surgeon X, a sci-fi comic about a surgeon working in a future where antibiotics are no longer working. Sara also currently works for the UK Government's Environment Agency as Innovation & Engagement Manager

Surgeon X: A case study of the representation of antimicrobial resistance in a comic book



Briony Barr, Artist, Co-founder of the Scale Free Collective

Briony Barr is an Australian interdisciplinary visual artist and co-founder of Scale Free Network, an art-science collective which focuses on visualising 'invisible' microbial worlds. She has collaborated on seven storybooks and graphic novels which have been translated into Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Arabic. Briony is an honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne's School of Physics



Microbes, Molecules and mucus: expanding ecological imagination through storytelling

Graphic public health: Why comics work for risk communication about microbes



Dr. Meredith Li-Vollmer, Public Health - Seattle & King County

Dr. Li-Vollmer is a communications specialist at Public Health – Seattle & King County and clinical assistant professor in Health Services at the University of Washington School of Public Health