



**Expanding
the
Conversation**

CRASSH
2001 – 2021

“CRASSH is the humanities version of the collider found in particle physics, or even, to borrow a word coined by James Joyce, a ‘colliderscope’, generating new knowledge and insights from the concussion of different ways of thinking”

**Professor Steven Connor
Director of CRASSH**



Executive Summary

The Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, or CRASSH, at the University of Cambridge was established in 2001 to act as a convening force in the academic study of the arts and humanities. The ethos of CRASSH has always been to bring people from different academic disciplines together to create interdisciplinary dialogue across Cambridge's faculties and departments in the arts, social sciences and humanities, and to build links with colleagues working in science and technology.

As CRASSH enters its third decade, it has grown into one of the largest humanities centres in the world, and is a major presence in academic life, both in the UK and internationally. It is peerless in terms of the scale and range of its operations. It provides a home within Cambridge's rich intellectual environment for creative, big-picture thinking across the arts and humanities, and draws together academic colleagues not just within the University, but from around the world.

CRASSH exists as a space for intellectual renewal and experiment, and as a place for academic collision and convergence. It is committed, not only to generating new solutions to long-established problems, but also to the early identification of new kinds of predicament altogether. Importantly, it maintains strong links with scientists and policymakers to ensure direct pathways to impact.

CRASSH was founded to accelerate new ideas and ways of thinking, and continues to do so. It was an important step as the last 20 years have shown us the need for new ways of thinking. Bringing academic colleagues together across subjects, and to promote interdisciplinary thinking, remains necessary. However, this need has evolved, and we must do more to expand conversations in the arts and humanities, and to open them up to broader discussion. In particular, we must make a considered effort to move beyond the Euro-American thinking that prevails in many leading research institutions in the Global North. This is critical because the arts and humanities are a study, not just of who we are, but also how and why. To be focused too heavily on one group of people and cultures at the expense of others is to be fundamentally weakened.

As we look to the future, we are seeking to continue our good work on a much more global scale. To achieve this and to deliver real impact, we are seeking visionary philanthropic partners, committed to working with us to promote diversity of thought and background in academia, and in doing so to change the world for the better.



CRASSH develops and supports major, long-term interdisciplinary programmes of research that face the big questions of history and contemporary society with a unique, three-fold approach:

- It hosts the very best scholars, both early in their careers and those more established, in a stimulating and supportive environment to conduct high-calibre interdisciplinary research in a series of visiting fellowship programmes. It has been home to 113 researchers, including 59 post-doctoral research associates, invited 518 Fellows from across academic disciplines, and housed a huge number of visiting academics from all over the world.
- Since its inception, CRASSH has played host to leaders in their fields from around the world, including: Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google; Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand; Pierre Rosenberg, former Chief Executive of the Louvre; Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State; Alastair Campbell, former UK Government Director of Communications; and award-winning author and journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge.
- It selects, organises and funds cutting-edge research groups of Cambridge scholars to explore new questions, and has supported 71 research networks with 443 convenors in the past 20 years. It runs a programme of conferences to take these ideas on to an international stage and organises lectures and outreach programmes to bring them to a broader public. CRASSH has run more than 4,000 public events since its launch.
- It hosts interdisciplinary research projects – almost 30 to date – and acts as a springboard for post-doctoral research fellows working on these full-scale projects.

A small example of the diverse work CRASSH has hosted includes:

Conspiracy and Democracy

This project, founded in 2013, set out to provide a 'natural history' of conspiracy theorising and produce a deeper and richer understanding of this fascinating and insidious phenomenon. Rather presciently, given the current climate, it revealed the extent to which conspiracy theories have become mainstream rather than marginal beliefs across much of Europe and the US. The Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, founded within CRASSH with funding from the Minderoo Foundation, builds on this work.

Limits of the Numerical

This project explored the effects on a system of social policy when numerical quantification and evaluation is introduced into that system. The project looked at three distinct strands of social policy — education, climate change and healthcare — areas where social science, policy and politics interact with intense urgency. International and interdisciplinary in its conception, a team from a different major university — Chicago, Cambridge, and Santa Barbara California — researched each strand. The Cambridge project focused on healthcare, looking at the role of numerical quantification in the NHS.

Centre for the Study of Existential Risk

An interdisciplinary research centre dedicated to the study of existential risk, the Centre's work, particularly on biorisk and pandemics, has become increasingly pertinent in recent times. CSER convenes academics around six main areas of focus:

- The science of global risk
- Global catastrophic biological risks
- Extreme risks and the global environment
- Risks from AI
- Global justice and global catastrophic risk
- Managing extreme technological risks

CRASSH was also home to the early research that has gone on to become the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence – an interdisciplinary community of researchers working to ensure that we humans make the best of the opportunities of artificial intelligence as it develops. Both LCFI and CSER demonstrate CRASSH's ability to ignite and incubate ideas to become independent research centres in their own right.

Making Visible

This project aimed to understand the roles visual resources and practices played in the development and dissemination of scientific knowledge in the first fifty years of the Royal Society, and resulted in the production of an image database of great value to the Royal Society.

CRASSH has also hosted hugely pertinent research on pandemics and epidemics, for example a series of conversations between high-level policy makers bringing a humanities perspective to tackling Ebola, and research projects including:

Expertise Under Pressure

A project designed to establish the role of experts in understanding social change, and to produce a broad framework for understanding what makes expertise authoritative, when experts overreach, and what realistic demands communities should place on experts.

Visual Representations of the Third Plague Pandemic

A project to investigate the visual record of the third plague pandemic in East Asia, South Asia, Africa and the Americas, and how it shaped both scientific understandings and public perceptions of infectious disease epidemics in the modern era.

The breadth and depth of CRASSH's work has established it as a hub for stimulating interdisciplinary and disciplinary research, a vital catalyst for new resources of thought, establishing new intellectual networks and affiliations, responding to emerging political and social challenges, engaging new publics in humanities research and helping to shape public policy.

A Vision for the Future

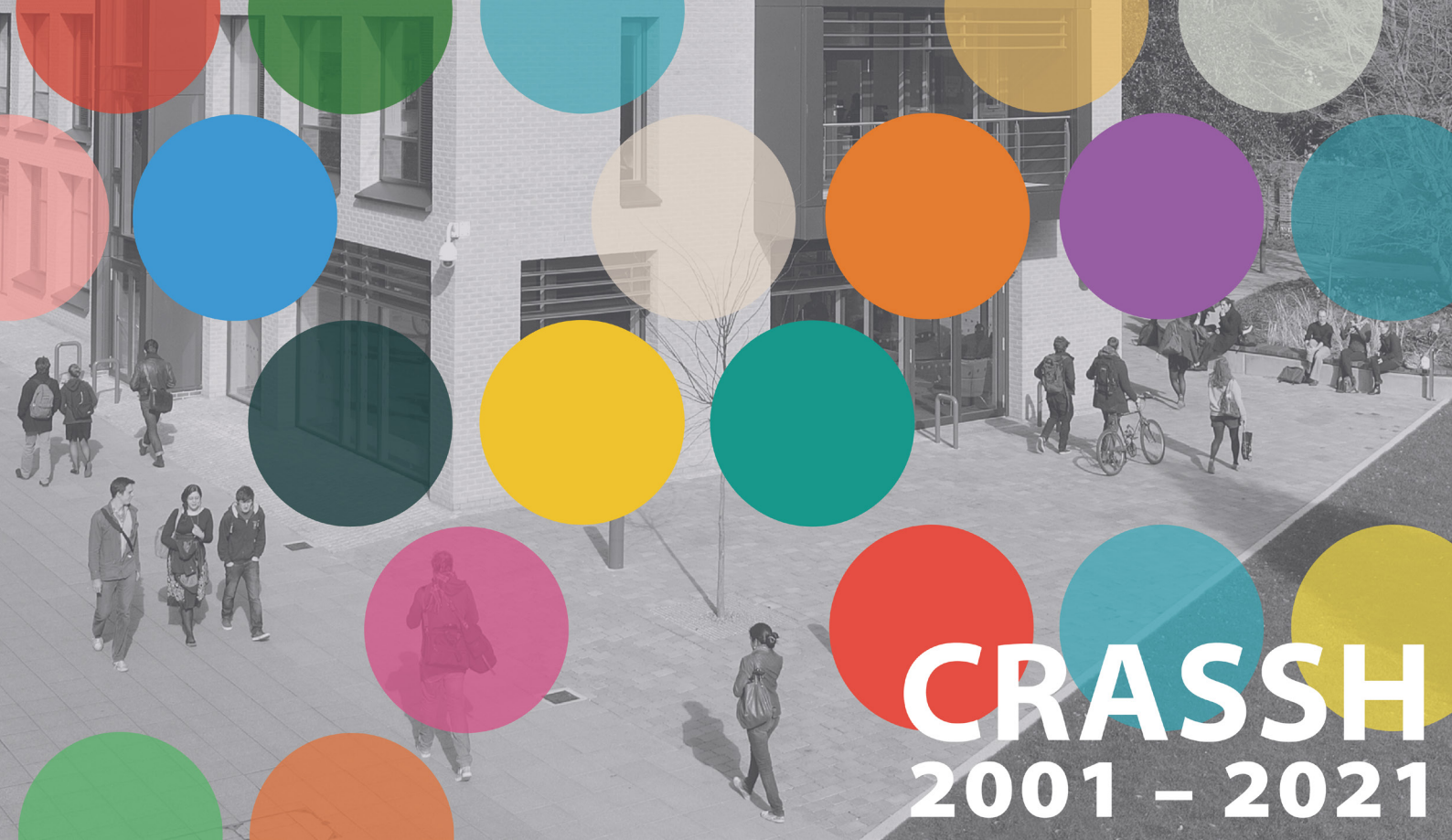
The greatest challenges of our age – climate change, global food security, maximising the benefits of new technologies whilst minimising the risk of harm, tackling diseases such as cancer – cannot be addressed by science, or indeed by any one academic discipline, alone. With no input from behavioural scientists, economists, historians or ethicists, science advances in a vacuum, and harnessing the benefits of this progress to deliver truly effective solutions to global problems is impossible. It is vital, too, that this critical humanities perspective is involved throughout the research into and development of these new ideas and technologies, to pre-empt any issues that arise rather than to be applied retrospectively to try and fix them. To really address the challenges we face, we need new kinds of intellectuals, new kinds of experts.

CRASSH continues to assert the need for humanities to be part of the conversation and to draw both practitioners and policymakers into innovative, interdisciplinary collaboration. But we can, and must, do more to draw academic thought closer to real-world issues, and to ensure that the skills and perspective the humanities can provide are a part of the whole research and development pipeline. We must expand our training and development efforts so that we can do more than offer a humanities perspective on things already in existence. Instead, we can impart the skills and expertise a humanities education provides to as many people as possible – early-career academics from all disciplines, people from industry, commerce, banking, the government, the police and security services. And simultaneously, we must expand the conversation to draw in more diverse voices, backgrounds and experiences, and extend intellectual and research opportunities to those from underrepresented backgrounds, either geographical or societal.

To support this endeavour, and mark CRASSH's 20th year, we have established the CRASSH 20th Anniversary Fund, set up in memory of our founding Director, the late Professor Ian Donaldson (1935-2020). We are seeking to raise £1 million for this fund, to establish a Fellowship Programme with a particular focus on bringing people from the Global South to Cambridge. Traditionally, these voices and experiences have been underrepresented in the University and we need the brightest and best minds from across the world to add their thinking as we start to tackle society's biggest problems from the humanities perspective. Additionally, this fund will support conferences, events and other outreach activities.

Supporting this fund will enable us to continue delivering a programme of fascinating and relevant research outputs to widening circles of students, academics, policymakers and the public, but also to expand and create new and exciting opportunities for people from across the world to work together at CRASSH.





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