Tweet the “phallic teacher”: early career feminist education research, Altmetrics and alternative peer review

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Tweet the “phallic teacher”: Early career feminist education research, Altmetrics and alternative peer review

OMG, today’s newspaper is about Trump and his fight with Turnbull¹, and then a tweet from the “phallic teacher” Altmetrics links right back to @realDonaldTrump...

It feels like he is close - he is literally in the room, there is this huge sense of bulk, weight, like he was behind Hilary in the debates. I feel frightened. It’s as if I’m up against something like a cliff. How do you fight a cliff? Why assume you have reason, or human rights on your side? He’s said he will pull the US out of human rights treaties. The world has tilted on its axis and I could be maligned by him and his millions of supporters. Breitbart. They know where I work.

Entry in Lucinda’s academic journal, 2017

In September 2016, The Australian Educational Researcher (AER) published an article titled, Meet the phallic teacher: Designing curriculum and identity in a neoliberal imaginary (McKnight, 2016a). This article was a revised version of the conference paper that had won the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Early Career Researcher (ECR) Award in 2015, as the result of a double anonymous peer review process. In this chapter, Lucinda and Linda, respectively as author and journal editor, give accounts of the publication process and the negotiation of personal and professional risks involved in publishing in the contemporary mediascape with its new social ecologies and “democratic” review processes around academic labour.

We then consider the article’s Twitter impact, represented by Altmetric’s digital curation service, and the discursive themes emerging in this space. In doing this work, we write into the identified gap in the literature around the abuse of academics in social media, particularly

¹ Australian Prime Minister
on Twitter (Campbell, 2017; Thomson, 2017; Lupton, Mewburn & Thomson, 2018). We call for greater institutional attention to more nuanced affective, personal and professional impacts of public engagement that cannot be displayed by metrics, yet are created by them. In concluding, we will argue for much more timely, skilful, strategic and specific institutional support for those communicating research via social media. We need to engage with new media publics in creative, strategic, critical and political ways.

The “phallic teacher” article links British sociologist Angela McRobbie’s (2009) concept of the hyperfeminised phallic girl compliant with resurgent patriarchy and contemporary teachers compliant with neoliberal demands. Lucinda’s article describes a case study in which the researcher worked with teachers to design curriculum at a coeducational secondary school outside Melbourne and outlines their concerns about mandated curriculum and instrumentalism in both language and policy. These are not controversial opinions, but the article does take a feminist poststructuralist approach to data analysis and argues that metrics, measurements, benchmarks and standards are features of a masculinist neoliberal education.

Ironically, within months, metrics rocketed the article into the social media stratosphere. By October 2017 – just over a year since its publication – the article had been mentioned 205 times by 191 Twitter users with an upper bound of 339,872 followers, and was #1 of all outputs from AER, as well as being in Altmetric’s top category for attention. Having tracked well over eight million research outputs, Altmetric determined this article to be in the 99th percentile and in the top 5% of all research outputs they had ever monitored. These figures ostensibly represent institutionally desirable impacts of the article, but we offer our perspectives as author and editor here, so that our analysis may be read through and contextualised by these accounts.

Lucinda’s account
I was working at my desk in my office when the email from AER’s editor arrived, to advise me of the anxiously awaited outcome of the review process for my submitted article. I was shocked, however, to read the following from Linda. While the peer reviews had been positive, she told me:

you should know the title of your AARE conference paper was singled out by a well-known blogger who used it as an example of "silly" research in Education, see:[link removed] There is also a new Twitter account @RealPeerReview² that is posting similar examples of research published in peer reviewed journals... Whilst I'm not suggesting that academics curb their creativity (that would be hypocritical!), I do have a responsibility to advise academics (ECRs particularly) of what's going on out there...

To have my work so publicly and prematurely judged on the title of the paper, for an audience of thousands, seemed excruciatingly compromising. As I did not have a Twitter account and knew little about the platform, this ignorance contributed to a sense of losing control. I began to wonder why female and/or feminist academics should begin their careers dealing with both defamatory threats and potential editorial censorship. I acknowledge here that intersectionality may intensify such restrictions on others, for example those who are also from minority groups in relation to race or ability, or who may be attacked for other kinds of “identity politics”. I have experienced only a slice of the hate pie aimed at those who challenge further norms through diverse abilities, cultural backgrounds, genders or sexualities.

My university’s seminars on researcher profiles and dissemination of research had not covered the risks and challenges of social media exposure; such presentations were given to

² This account has operated via several iterations and is currently titled New Real Peer Review.
romanticising voice, reach and impact and ignoring the gendered nature of online threats. This performative drive does not calculate or minister to personal costs or to the affects of being a public intellectual today. Nor does it take into account particular vulnerabilities, that some academics – including myself as a mature age ECR with additional needs – may experience, such as crises of confidence and identity conflicts in becoming orientated to academia (Ivanic, 1998).

After publication of the article, I watched the Altmetric score grow with mingled delight and horror and followed links down rabbit holes to topsy turvy worlds, in which I was maligned for trying to turn children gay or squander public money on narcissistic pursuits. I was even reported directly to Donald Trump, via Twitter, as described in the opening quotation from my journal. It seemed astonishing that a critique of neoliberal curriculum design should be co-opted and put to work in the service of social ills such as homophobia and misogyny, without commentators having read my work, as the full article is behind the publisher’s paywall. A mere title, along with the abstract made available on publication in the journal, had been enough to incite a vicious response.

In my defence, I wrote a blog post for the Gender and Education Association (2016b). This was duly discovered by my Twitter audience and incorporated into further tweets. I had been glad to have the chance to argue for the article’s credentials, yet found that I had merely incited the trolls, who considered my awards as further evidence of the incestuous corruption of academia. As I became more confident on Twitter, I tried to redirect the discussion, tweeting, for example, the link to the “phallic teacher” conference paper (not behind a paywall) and suggesting critics read it before tweeting, but to no avail.

Hostile social media backgrounds to academic work are noted by other feminists too (Campbell, 2017) and form part of the context in which we research and publish. Then there
is the political context, in which Donald Trump has seemingly licensed a renewed postfeminist sexism. As a mother I’ve become aware of my eleven year old son’s peers in Grade Six playing pussy-grabbing at lunch time - the boys chase the girls and try to grab them between the legs, just as the US president recommends. The personal and political are intertwined in this account of trying to be a scholar-mother-woman-tweeter-citizen negotiating amorphous hostility in the Twitterverse and blog-o-sphere.

**Linda’s account**

During my three year term as AER Editor, I introduced a number of initiatives to improve the journal’s quality, lead times, ranking and impact, which is in part determined by Twitter-dependent Altmetric scores. When Lucinda submitted her paper to AER, I knew immediately which reviewers to send it to: three leading scholars with expertise in gender and education, and feminist theory. In the meantime, however, I had become aware of Twitter activity deriding the title of Lucinda’s paper in the 2015 AARE conference program, along with mentions via a new handle, @RealPeerReview representing a group account purporting to expose flawed research.

Not surprisingly, I agonised over what to do and what to say when it came time to send the reviews to Lucinda. Despite what Twitter devotees may think, Twitter does not have the coverage of other social media sites (e.g. Facebook), and most Australian academics are not familiar with it. As such, I suspected that Lucinda had no idea that her work (well, really, the title of her paper!) was being used to discredit Australian educational research in toto. The whole saga reminded me of the witch-hunt that the Australian Federal Liberal Party has conducted at various times in relation to projects funded by the Australian Research Council, where Ministers have vetoed grants that had been recommended for funding after rigorous review because of “silly” sounding titles (Woelert & Yates, 2015). That Lucinda didn’t know
about this trend was no protection, and – given that I and other colleagues knew what was
going on – I believed I had a responsibility, as both an editor and a mentor, to alert her that
she could be (as I put it later) “heading into a shitstorm”.

Lucinda’s paper was published in AER with the original title and I supported her decision. I
would have understood if she – as an ECR – wanted to tone it down but I never suggested
that and was pleased that she chose not to. As editor of AER, I was happy to wear whatever
criticism came along because I was satisfied that her paper had withstood the scrutiny of
three highly respected feminist scholars and I believed that her work would make an original
and interesting contribution to the research literature on teachers’ work. As a university
academic, I also strongly believe in academic freedom and freedom of speech, which would
have been the victims if Lucinda had modified her work. I did worry for her though because I
knew how vicious those involved could be.

**Locating this work**

These two accounts position us as authors and researchers in relation to the article. Returning
to consider the commentary on the “phallic teacher” as a case study of a media phenomenon,
we draw on a number of academic fields researching the use of social media by academics,
including sexism in the academy, early career research in the neoliberal university, platform
capitalism, Twitter misogyny and ethical debates about social media research. The way we
position this work is influenced by our own backgrounds in gender and media studies
(Lucinda) and inclusive education (Linda) and we attempt to briefly and selectively describe
the discussions to which we seek to contribute, as well as how they overlap and intertwine as
complex discursive entanglements.

**From blogging to microblogging**
Gender had little salience in early, idealised work on academic participation in social media (see for example Davies & Merchant, 2007). The performance of academic identity through writing (Ivanic, 1998) and publishing started to shift online as part of a rhetoric of apparent democratisation (Beer & Burrows, 2007) with academics potentially being in generative dialogue with each other and their publics. Academics could potentially shape narratives of researcher identity for new media audiences, in the manner extolled by Anthony Giddens (1991), launching and managing online projects of the self.

This optimism was based on neoliberal fantasies of control, partnership and choice and, by the advent of microblogging, some of the issues with online interaction had already emerged. For those participating in the hyperpublic realm of internet exposure, the digital self was increasingly understood to be fundamentally “coarser” and the environment colder (boyd, 2008, p. 129). Fast forward five years, and there were calls to move beyond “simple advocacy” (Thomson & Mewburn, 2013, p. 1106) in relation to academic blogging. More recent studies explore the extent of verbal abuse experienced by women on Twitter (Bartlett et al., 2014; Cole, 2015) and feminist digilantism in response to online misogyny (Jane, 2016). The titles of works in this field, representing quotes from tweets, suggest how idealism has been difficult to sustain: “Get back to the kitchen, cunt” (Jane, 2014, p. 558) and “Apparently being a self-absorbed c**t is now academically lauded” (Campbell, 2017), with the latter specifically directed at those engaging in autoethnography (also mentioned in the “phallic teacher” article abstract as one of multiple methods employed).

This online world is not necessarily different from what takes place offline, in the academy. There is no binary between a crude and violent online frontier and an academic paradise of freedom, acceptance and agency. Universities are often hostile and hypermasculinised spaces for ECRs (Macoun & Miller, 2014), where precarity rules, particularly for those beginning their careers (Gill, 2010). Being an academic is to participate in a “masculinist fantasy” in
which female academics who argue a case are reviled (Hey, 2011, p. 214) and all are invited to “libidinally refashion” (Morely, 2015, p. 34) their personae to fit neoliberal performance objectives. The irony with the “phallic teacher” article is that the tumescent Altmetric score is largely fashioned from masculine derision, with misogyny propelling gender critique to metric success! What was intended to extinguish feminist analysis has created a much wider audience than imagined, both within the academy and the Twitterverse.

Both spaces are demonstrated to be profoundly gendered (Sauvigny, 2014) and sources of “toxic shame” (Gill, 2010, p. 232) no longer limited to the often-humiliating rituals of formal peer review. The general public, so courted by early academic social media fans, is transformed by the anonymity and flashfire of Twitter into a force vastly expanding the disciplinary gaze and normative expectations already directed at ECRs (Rusch & Ledingham, 2016). These spaces, in fact, mirror each other in enacting and reinforcing tenacious and structural exclusion (Morley, 2015). This ethical vacuum of Twitter commentary, minus the mediating influence of journal editors, has heightened the way we ourselves are attuned to an ethics of conducting Twitter research and our determination to work responsibly and with integrity in this process, so as not to create further harm.

Twitter commentary does not operate independently, but in this particular case, is aggregated and amplified by Altmetric. Literature contemplating the rise of alternative metrics for measuring scholarly impact (Priem et al., 2010; Wouters & Costas, 2012; Hammarfelt, 2014) limits critique to concerns about whether data can be manipulated, systems can be gamed, or mentions may be superficial. Discussion of the gendered nature of social media commentary and the questionable ethics of hosting misogynistic and defamatory reviews is absent yet urgently needed.
An ethics of Twitter research

In seeking to study the discursive features of commentary around the “phallic teacher” article, we considered close study of individual tweets and Twitter accounts, to attempt to explore and clarify what was meant by each tweet. We are aware that the collection of Twitter data without informed consent is considered acceptable (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), as it is public (accessed without registration or membership required) and, in this case, not sensitive, even if crudely expressed. Twitter, more than other platforms such as Facebook, is understood by users to be “inherently public” (Beninger, Fry, Jago, Lepps, Nass & Silvester, 2014, p. 29). Yet this is contentious, and we wish to err on the side of caution; even if tweets are in the public domain, analysing them as data shifts the context for consumption and publication (Sveningsson Elm, 2009).

There are numerous issues with using Twitter data and the ethics in this field are continually evolving through praxis (Anderson & Jirotka, 2015), so that what seems acceptable today may be unethical tomorrow. For example, it may be difficult to contact pseudonymic avatars (Sveningsson Elm, 2009), who may be individuals or groups. There is also no way of knowing if the person contacted is the person who tweeted and a prerequisite for ensuring voluntary informed consent is being certain of the identity of the person giving consent. There would be no way of knowing if participants were over 18 years of age and therefore able to give consent, and further information, such as gender, would be difficult to confirm as well.

Engaging directly with tweeters who have already expressed hostile or negative attitudes to the researchers may also expose the researchers to harm and further abuse or reputational damage. This contact may also be thought of as a form of “feeding the trolls”, validating their views and rewarding their comments by confirming that they have been read and considered.
Recent work (Beninger et al., 2014) has emphasised the views of social media users in this evolving area of ethics and we recognise that ethics are always a balance of risks, needs and potential harms. Ethical decisions are also indivisible from conceptual frames and research design. In seeking to respect others and ourselves, to conduct research with integrity, and to minimise harm to all, we have chosen to:

- make the focus of this study text-based, rather than person-based (McKee & Porter, 2009). This fits with our interest in Foucauldian multimodal discourse analysis, rather than persona or identity analysis, and on what discourse does, rather than it says (Foucault, 1972). In this context, with the intention to discuss broad trends experienced through digital ethnography, not individual posts or users, we believe informed consent is not required.

- avoid the mention of Twitter handles/identifiers associated with individuals, acknowledging that handles may be traced back to offline identities, and that views expressed on Twitter may be exaggerated by anonymity: digital context shaping content (Baym, 2009).

- avoid reproducing tweets in their entirety (Ahmed, 2015) as this may facilitate tracing. Instead we paraphrase or use parts of tweets without associating them with/near handles (Beninger et al., 2014), or use an interpretive collage method to represent tweets (Campbell, 2017).

- Be reflexively aware of our own desires to “name and shame” detractors and to be alert to places where these desires may surface and result in risk to the reputations of commentators.

**Design for researching social media**
Researching social media is the world of sentiment analysis and Twitter analytics, of large data sets imported into programs such as Nvivo, or analysed by combined automated and human methods (Ahmed, 2015), machine intelligence and the training of classifiers for natural language processing (Bartlett et al., 2014). For this study, considering our interest in commentary on the Phallic teacher article, and a small data set incorporating the “flow of communications” (Gill, 2010, p. 229) mentioning the article title or link, we have chosen what might now be considered as “traditional” human-enacted methods of empirical research into social network media (Nentwich & Konig, 2012): internet inquiry and multimodal discourse analysis. This flow of communications includes emails between the article author and journal editor, the published online article, the Altmetric details pages framing, republishing and contextualising related Twitter data (2017c), further threads in Twitter linked from Altmetric, and Lucinda’s institutional repository page badged by Altmetric.

Boundaries can be difficult to define in internet inquiry (Hine, 2009), yet this is important for any research project. It can be helpful to begin by focusing on an online culture (boyd, 2012) and so we have thought about the culture of “democratic” review around this particular article as represented by data science, as a case study. We are interested in how the effects of discourse are shaped by textual assemblages including the tracking, monitoring, collating and visualising functions of alternative metrics and the role of such assemblages in reifying a neoliberal imaginary for ECRs. This is the new environment for the dissemination of research.

With academic identity increasingly understood not just to confront “metric assemblages” (Burrows, 2012, p. 355) but to be actively constituted by them, we seek to describe how this might happen in relation to publication and review metrics. This should reinforce that we have not been driven by curiosity about individual tweeters, their motivations, beliefs and concerns, and the desire to find out what they really think (as if a they could actually be
identified) and to pursue their truths. Instead we explore how various visual and textual statements made by both avatars and institutions “coagulate to form strategic discursive practices which work to (re)secure dominant relations of power” (Graham, 2007, p. 197) in relation to this particular article.

To achieve this, we draw on Foucauldian theoretical resources to develop a discourse analysis appropriate to this project. This involves attention to rhetorical constructions shaping strategic readings of texts (in this case, the “phallic teacher” article) and the statements (both visual and textual) that:

- produce, formulate and interpellate (Althusser, 1972; Butler, 1997);
- constitute a locatable and specific object of discourse (Graham, 2011);
- classify, particularly through a process of abjection (Kristeva, 1982) in which an exterior to acceptable or normative subjectivity is defined.

A Foucauldian or feminist poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis also suggests awareness of intertextuality, unresolved tensions, diverse perspectives, ambiguities and contradictions (Baxter, 2003; Rose, 2007). By writing collaboratively, with different perspectives on the article and experiences of the publication process and effects of commentary, we hope to call our different perspectives into play and also, through our own productive research work in determining an object of scrutiny, acknowledge the perspectives of others as formulated in discursive themes. There is a plurality of voices even in the article commentary and we wish to foreground the ways power is negotiated, rather than create a dualism of “good” researchers and “bad” critics. Instead of defining, exposing or discrediting tweeters, we construct an argument around what is being put to work by the convergence of multiple discursive statements and multiple platforms.
Achieving these aims has meant spending time immersed in materials selected for study through repeated re-reading and participatory observation online, allowing the material itself to offer insights, leads and themes, and searching for connected keywords and recurring images (Rose, 2007). Foucault’s (1972) advice seems particularly pertinent to Altmetric’s visual aggregate of tweets, as he suggests studying:

...relations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors were unaware of each other’s existence); relations between groups of statements thus established (even if these groups do not concern the same, or even adjacent fields; even if they do not possess the same formal level; even if they are not the locus of assignable exchanges); relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind (technical, economic, political, social). (p. 29)

As both Twitter and Altmetric are technologies of visual display that we have become intimately familiar with through our everyday work, discourse analysis in this instance is not the detached and formal micro-analysis of print language (as per Fairclough, 2003), but multimodal analysis that is not detached from our embodied subjectivities (Koivuren, 2010). While we are familiar with and draw on semiotic resources for visual analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), this work is more attuned with Foucauldian discourse analysis (Baxter, 2003; Rose, 2007). We would like to move beyond a micro/macro binary, however, to understand that the “everyday professional” and the “global political” are inextricably linked. In this approach, affect, as a bodily experience of pre-verbal intensity (Shouse, 2005), along with emotion and feeling are also important, and here our narratives come into play.
Discussion of findings

Tweeters commenting on the “phallic teacher” article create their 140-character tweets within the microblogging platform, Twitter, and send them out to be read by their followers.

Altmetric markets itself as a real time curation service, tracking online mentions of a particular item as “a new and better way to understand all the impacts of research” that reveals what was “hidden” before (Altmetric, 2017b). This is in comparison to traditional methods, such as impact factors and the h-index, hence the term “altmetrics” or alternative metrics. The Altmetric donut, a multi-coloured circular graphic (blue for Twitter impact) contains the attention score; an algorithmically calculated number representing the attention an item has received. This is displayed to the left of the item’s Altmetric details page. On the right are the tabs showing a summary, with a global map shaded to show geographic impact and demographic details of commentators or an aggregate of actual mentions. It is this aggregate, created through an application programming interface (API) with Twitter that creates a readily accessible overview of how a publication is ostensibly being received.

Institutions such as publishers and universities licence the Twitter donut and can program or embed it into their own pages and platforms. Springer, for example, which published the “phallic teacher” article, began including a “Shares” button linked to Altmetric in 2014, to make each article’s research impact more “visible” and “add more value not only for users, but also for authors” (Springer, 2014). We suggest the nature of this “value” is complicated at best.

Altmetric reformats the collected Twitter data to display multiple tweets in two wide rows, each showing the profile picture, handle and full text of the tweet. The screen scrolls, and displays 100 tweets per page, so a user can read 10 or so tweets at a time, depending on individual screen display settings, creating a bulk review effect, of accolades and/or abuse. In
the case of the “phallic teacher” article, many of the hotlinks in these tweets are to @RealPeerReview, the anonymous group account. This data is accessible to anyone who clicks on the Springer “Shares” link or the donut embedded in the article’s institutional repository record, in stark contrast to traditional processes of peer review, in which “data” remains in the anonymised author-publisher-reviewer loop. Tweeters will have agreed to this distribution and modification of their intellectual property when accepting the Twitter terms of service (Twitter, 2017), but the process for authors and employees understanding and consenting to the addition of these links to their stored papers is much more opaque.

Altmetric’s sourcing and framing are part of the digital media assemblage forming public commentary on this article, and part of the discursive coalescence acting to make particular claims, including claims to truth. It is worth noting that the claims made by Altmetric and Springer, cited above, are based on assumptions about the truthfulness of data, when it is known that data are always generated, and algorithms designed, with intent (Kitchin, 2014). Altmetric’s claims to truth are called into question, however, if readers scroll down below the fold, to where they acknowledge that the volatility of social media means attention scores can only be compared against outputs published at exactly the same time, and that the algorithm used to calculate this score is frequently being updated, so that comparisons are mathematically illogical (2017). Numbers for comparison are only meaningful if generated by the same formulae.

Similar claims to truth are made by the alternative and unqualified reviewers Altmetric hosts, including @RealPeerReview, a group Twitter account dedicated to “exposing” (Mali, 2017) research perceived to be flawed. This group has had a number of iterations, having been closed down by Twitter in 2014 following complaints. All these iterations, however, perform the same function, making the truth claim that only they can conduct “real” peer review, by operating outside of the academy. Members are pseudonymous and the group’s Twitter
background banner image is a photograph of a large blue eye, inside a lens motif and foregrounded against lines of binary code. This code and the Altmetric attention score, themselves phallic tools, represent numerical “accuracy” and positivist certainty. The @RealPeerReview profile picture is a winged blue cartoon eye over a pyramid, symbolising both reach and power; these panoptical iris motifs rhyme visually and semantically with the article’s Altmetric donut, all making claims to augmented surveillance of research. The irony here is that, as other commentators have noted (Mali, 2017), @RealPeerReview’s comments are based on reading titles and abstracts of articles, not full articles. In comparison to traditional peer review, this form of surveillance and judgement is demonstrably superficial.

The ocular metaphor has been argued to be a sexist and ableist construct (McKnight & Whitburn, 2017). Here it serves to constitute an ignorant or recalcitrant academic cohort as an object requiring surveillance. Altmetric, in one of neoliberalism’s skilful twists, markets this monitoring as being more inclusive and fair, incorporating all fora for comment, to better serve individuals’ promotion and tenure projects (2017). More specifically, the cohort particularly requiring policing, according to the “phallic teacher” tweeters, is scholars with an interest in gender, including those who align with feminist, queer and postcolonial thinking.

This is ironic in relation to the original “phallic teacher” conference paper, which was not submitted in the AARE category of “Gender, Sexualities and Cultural Studies”, but in “Teachers’ Work and Lives”, and the subsequent article’s main argument is that teachers need more autonomy and respect. The mere mention of a gendered concept in the title and abstract serves to place it in @RealPeerReview’s sights, as part of a purportedly out-of-control, burgeoning body of academic work about gender that is corrupting and defiling education.

In thinking about what is produced, constituted and classified by this discursive assemblage around the “phallic teacher” article, the concept of the abject (Kristeva, 1982; Butler, 1993) is
useful in representing what must be rejected through normative masculine subject formation. The tweets in Altmetric and linked threads invoke metaphors of excrement and expulsion; this is the figurative “shitstorm” Linda feared for Lucinda. The unread “phallic teacher” article creates disgust, is denounced as “shit” in more than one language, and alleged to have been pulled out of nether parts of Lucinda’s anatomy. Reading these comments the first time around was personally shocking, but repeated readings reveal their broader cultural politics. Kristeva (1982?) links disgust to fear – fear of disintegration of the subject – and it may be surmised that the article’s mostly masculine Twitter commentators are motivated, at a basic level, by fear, and fear of gender and sexual diversity in particular. “Trolls” here come to mean not only those who deliberately post inflammatory material online, but those who disparage as an act of gendered provocation.

Just as these diversities are viewed as distortions of nature and biology, so diverse mental health is externalised and demonised in these tweets. Lucinda is denounced as insane, crazy, mad and a danger to children. Men and boys are considered to be particularly imperilled, and anger about this filters across the Altmetric screen, though text language of explosive rage, handles such as @thefuryofbigfoot\(^3\), and avatar images of ninjas and skulls. Scrolling down the Altmetric pages, the screen is filled with profile pictures of knights, bulls, arrows, soldiers, pirates, beards and “head and shoulders” shots of men possibly using their own images. The eggplant emoji, which is a common device used to depict an erect penis on social media, appears frequently, as do direct links to Lucinda’s Twitter profile page and her university staff profile page.

The thread throbs with testosterone. It is sobering to remember that this commentary is accessible via a direct link from both the published article, and Lucinda’s professional institutional repository, therefore being officially sanctioned and instrumental to her

\(^3\) Indicative pseudonym used here to protect identity.
prospects of promotion. The most retweeted comment is one made by @RealPeerReview, about the way the “phallic teacher” denounces those who are not feminist poststructuralists. This chimes with other comments that work to define the field of education as neutral, apolitical, rational, based on truth and “real” binary biological sex differences. This is part of the ongoing masculinising project of dominating both research and education with a narrow, positivist and empiricist version of science that excludes diversity and all that is culturally coded as feminine (Harding, 1986; St Pierre, 2004; Lather, 2004).

Each time the link to the article is shared on Twitter, the journal image is rendered visible in the thread, associating the AER with the work within. However, the journal is never implicated or criticised and the attacks are always directed at the female author who is defined as a fantasist and paedophile obsessed with sex, promoting porn, and using fraudulent credentials. She is outed as a repeat offender, as further articles that do not fit positivist expectations of educational research come to the attention of the keyboard warriors who follow @RealPeerReview.

Kirsti Cole (2015) has claimed the goal of disciplinary Twitter rhetoric is “to silence women participating in public as feminist” (p. 356), through the establishment of sexist cultural logics. Ultimately, all the spurious claims described above, to truth, visibility, democracy, purity, sanity and rationality have the same disciplinary purpose, in relation to women participating in academia as feminist. This silencing is attempted not just by individuals, or a single group, but by a complex assemblage of networked digital social media agencies with which the performance of academic identity is inextricably linked. Yet there are still recognisable actors within these assemblages.

The question of what responsibility platforms should take for the activities they host cuts across media ecologies, implicating Facebook, Twitter and services such as Altmetrics that
curate other content. There are public calls for acknowledgement that algorithmic decisions facilitate workplace discrimination (Sample, 2017), based on research indicating that legal protections, such as rights not to be evaluated by automated decision-making, are inadequate (Wachter et al., 2016). Altmetric’s algorithms make the decision that the crude and abusive social media commentary on the “phallic teacher” is appropriate for re-publication and assemblage into a professionally valid numerical assessment. Altmetric’s shareholders take home their profits based on new rituals of public humiliation that are particularly harsh for junior female academics who are the targets of groups such as @RealPeerReview. It is an ethical imperative for such companies to recognise that “attention” is never neutral.

Conclusion: Disinfectant or abuse?

@RealPeerReview claims that “sunlight makes the best disinfectant” (Mali, 2017). Yet this sanitary action is taken against imaginary filth, in articles that have not been read. This is a minor detail, however, when compared to the cumulative power of this discursive media assemblage to generate the potential silencing effects of “toxic shame” (Gill, 2010, p. 232). This is what these discourses seek to do and they create, particularly for the early career academic, an intensified disciplinary gaze. The socially constructed academic self (Ivanic, 1998) must now participate in rhetorics of professional and performative empowerment via social media, while being made vulnerable to global publics and critiques that themselves make no recourse to reason. Hopes for new transparencies between academics and environments (Nentwich & Konig, 2012) seem naïve when said academics cannot respond to attacks, or attempts to interpellate them as scum, without feeding the trolls.

We ask where the institutions, employers, journals and platforms’ responsibilities lie, in the cultural media phenomenon of “democratic” or “alt” peer review driven by data science. This phenomenon trades in defamation and insult, yet institutions license data science companies’
visual aggregates of these attacks and proudly display their badges, facilitating the dissemination of discursive formulations undermining their own staff and/or authors. There was no institutional support provided for the author of the “phallic teacher”. No acknowledged duty of care, no legal backing, no pastoral interest or counselling offered. Experiencing “real” review, courtesy of Altmetric, has been a solitary, alone-at-a-desk, heart-thumping vigil, giving rise to diary entries like the one opening this chapter.

As academics and especially as ECRs, when we engage with social media to disseminate, discuss or receive feedback on our research, we need carefully conceived institutional support. The necessary expertise to provide this is likely to be located across universities and includes library staff, marketing departments, experts in academic branding, legal services and media studies academics. This is a university-wide issue that taps into global movements supporting the rights of women and diverse peoples; management must acknowledge that leaving staff (who publish to fulfil their roles) to endure social media attack as isolated individuals contravenes any policy supporting inclusion.

Specifically, we need the time allowance and skill development to:

- participate in social media platforms so we understand how they work and their affordances and threats.
- collaborate with expert mentors to develop strategic social media plans that address both dissemination and risk management in relation to every publication.
- speak out at every opportunity about the ways apparently neutral data science threatens to inhibit academic freedoms and to reinforce sexist academic cultures.
- engage with social media commentary creatively and politically, as we demonstrate here, putting it to work in ethical and theoretically informed ways that serve those who are targeted for abuse.
As we finalise this chapter, Australia’s annual national Stay Safe Online Week is starting, with warnings from our universities about passwords, data back up and anti-virus software. The kind of academic identity crime that lurks in the digitised mediascape is much more insidious, with control ceded to algorithms, metrics and Twitter punters. It is not possible to retreat to the cloisters. Could it be that more, rather than less engagement with these publics, can shift conversations? This is a question for our times, those who are under attack in broader society where vocal majorities have far-reaching discursive media assemblages at their service.

**References**


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