

# **Digital public criminology in Australia and New Zealand: Results from a mixed methods study of criminologists' use of social media**

Mark Wood,<sup>1</sup> Imogen Richards,<sup>2</sup> Mary Iliadis,<sup>3</sup> Michael McDermott<sup>4</sup>

## **Abstract**

The proliferation of social media in the so-called 'post-broadcast era' has profoundly altered the terrain for researchers to produce public scholarship and engage with the public. To date, however, the impact of social media on public criminology has not been subject to empirical inquiry. Drawing from a dataset of 116 survey responses and nine interviews, our mixed methods study addresses this opening by examining how criminologists in Australia and New Zealand have employed social media to engage in newsmaking and public criminology. This article presents findings from survey questions that assess the practices and perceptions of criminologists in relation to social media, and insights from an analysis that explores the political, ethical, and logistical issues raised by respondents. These issues include the democratising potential of social media in criminological research, and its ability to provide representation for historically marginalised populations. Questions pertaining to 'newsmaking criminology' and the wider performance of 'public criminology' are also addressed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of Criminology, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Vic 3052. Email: [mark.wood@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:mark.wood@unimelb.edu.au).

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer, Department of Criminology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Vic 3216. Email: [Imogen.richards@deakin.edu.au](mailto:Imogen.richards@deakin.edu.au).

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, Department of Criminology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Vic 3125. Email: [mary.iliadis@deakin.edu.au](mailto:mary.iliadis@deakin.edu.au).

<sup>4</sup> Teaching Associate and Researcher, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Vic 3052. Email: [michael.mcdermott@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:michael.mcdermott@unimelb.edu.au).

# Keywords

Public engagement, public criminology, social media, digital criminology

# Introduction

The proliferation of social media in what has been termed ‘the post-broadcast era’ (Merrin, 2014) has the potential to create new avenues for public and community engagement with criminological scholarship. Echoing calls for social media-facilitated public engagement by researchers of digital humanities and public sociology movements (Schneider and Simonetto 2017; Daniels and Thistlethwaite 2016), some, such as Schneider (2015: 41) and Powell et al. (2018: 199), advocate an ‘e-public criminology’ or ‘digital public criminology’ that capitalises on the affordances these new technologies provide for public criminology and newsmaking criminological practices.

While interpretations of public criminology and newsmaking criminology are diverse and far-ranging (Uggen and Inderbitzin 2010),<sup>5</sup> positive and negative impacts resulting from engagements between criminology and social media have been well noted. On the one hand, social media creates new avenues through which criminologists can promote emerging research, network with academic and non-academic audiences, and facilitate stakeholder

---

<sup>5</sup> Echoing Burawoy’s (2005) inclusive conceptualisation of public sociology, we understand public criminology to broadly refer to criminological research practices that engage with various publics beyond the academy. This includes not only ‘newsmaking’ practices but also an array of other activities such as influencing policy debates, shaping cultural depictions of crime and justice, and providing representation to subjects of criminological (and justice) research who may otherwise be under- or misrepresented.

involvement in discourse and debate on criminological issues (Barak 2007; DeKeseredy 2011). On the other, engagement with matters of crime and criminology on the part of social media publics has led to concerns that discussion of these matters can become, at times, reductive, polarised, and sensational (Uggen 2015). To this point, the beneficial and problematic impacts of social media on criminology, and the influence of the discipline vice versa, have not been explored in empirical or rigorous detail.

In this article, we explore Australian and New Zealand (henceforth ANZ) criminologists' engagement with, and perceptions of, public scholarship in the dynamic and evolving early 21<sup>st</sup> century mediascape, which is fundamentally comprised of social media: a range of multi-platform websites and applications that enable users to generate and share ideas, opinions, and information, as media 'content', with others. Drawing from an empirical dataset of 116 survey responses with criminologists from Australia and New Zealand, and nine interviews conducted with early career to professoriate-level criminologists in Australia, this project contributes to contemporary understandings of social media and criminology, and the ways in which they interrelate.

## **Social media and public scholarship: A brief overview**

In the post-broadcast age, social media, narrowcasting, and prosumption, have outpaced linear forms of broadcast media, broadcasting and consumption, as the dominant societal trends in media engagement (Merrin 2014). While broadcast media in certain contexts remains central to the 21<sup>st</sup> century mediascape, the dominance of 'legacy' radio, television, and, most of all, print media, have arguably been challenged in the 'newsmaking' realm by the advent of participatory social media. The effect of this shift on the criminological landscape has been well noted. Pratt (2007), for example, argues that new media have

become a key facilitator of penal populism, while more recently, Lee and McGovern's (2013) work demonstrates how law enforcement and criminal justice agencies use social media to engage in crime and justice 'newsmaking'.

Indeed, while contemporary criminological issues and debates take place in and via the Internet, including social media, it is unsurprising that sociological inquiry itself has proliferated in similar domains. Responding to this emergent trend, a body of scholarship has examined the opportunities social media provide for public scholarship, including scholarly blogging (Solum 2006; Kjellberg 2010; Mahrt and Puschmann 2014), micro-blogging (Mahrt et al. 2014; Sullivan 2017), and self-archiving via open access sites (see Lupton 2013). Social media have led to the rise of the digital humanities (Burdick et al. 2012), while in the social sciences, these media have heralded the rise of digital sociology or 'e-public sociology' (Schneider 2012; 2017). This shift is characterised by areas of scholarly activity dedicated to an ethos of digitally-facilitated collaboration and networked scholarship that is publicly available (Lupton 2014). The potentialities of such forms of digital public scholarship for newsmaking have for some time been attended to by public criminologists. Barak (2007: 203), for example, asserted that "websites, blogs and podcasts are the preferred newsmaking criminological media of tomorrow", while DeKeseredy (2011: 93) notes that "using Facebook to help achieve social justice is a contemporary technique of newsmaking criminology that attracts more ... people each day. So are blogging and other new means of exchanging information".

Within this 'new media' environment, criminologists have furthermore developed their own social media domains. These include virtual public criminological 'blogospheres', such as *Public Criminology*, which includes testimony from stakeholders in criminal justice processes, including prisoners and former prisoners, interspersed with insights from

contributing criminologists articulated in easy-to-understand, lay terms. Elsewhere, criminology scholars have shared their work over dedicated academic social media platforms, including Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and Mendeley, as well as the unrestricted, open-access online database of pre-print research, SSRN (formerly ‘Social Science Research Network’). These platforms allow researchers to share versions of their work to bypass the publication ‘pay wall’, to connect with scholars in similar fields, and to use ‘altmetrics’ (alternative citation impact metrics) to gauge the exposure and reception of their work. At the same time it is necessary to recognise that, along with the benefits of social media engagement, corresponding measures of research impact (such as altmetrics and ‘likes’, ‘shares’, and ‘re-tweets’), increasingly function as key performance indicators in neoliberal academic settings. As Henry Giroux has highlighted (2002), in institutional environments characterised by a neoliberal ethic, corporatised, commercialised, and individualised performance expectations have created harm for researchers and students, while compromising the representativeness and integrity of ‘humanities’ research in particular.

While usage of social media on the part of criminologists may therefore in certain respects belie the negative impacts on academia of political-economic pressures, media engagement can also generate new avenues for social science research to become more inclusive and reflexive. If the type of ‘newsmaking criminology’ described in Barak’s (1988) article was largely unidirectional, participatory social media now offer the potential development of a public criminology that is truly dialogical. In this context, members of academic communities, and the broader public, can respond to criminologists’ work, while criminologists themselves may engage with their audiences in ‘real time’.

With attention to existing debates, this article contributes to a conversation about how criminologists in Australia and New Zealand may engage with a ‘criminology of the public’ through social and new media forums – an issue that was, for instance, recently raised by Goldsmith and Halsey (2017: 472) in an editorial for the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology. In doing so, it sheds light on the role of digital technology in public criminological domains and accounts for researchers’ perceptions of the benefits of public scholarship, as well as its perceived political, ethical, and logistical limitations.

## **Methodology**

Our study employed a two-phase mixed methodology comprised of a survey and semi-structured interviews (see Figure 1). The first phase was a survey featuring a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions, while the second phase consisted of survey participants electing to participate in a semi-structured interview to elaborate on their survey responses. Both phases of our research are discussed in more detail below.

### **Phase One: QUAN-qual survey**

The QUAN-qual phase of our research was a census survey of criminologists employed in teaching and/or research positions at universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, and South Africa. We received a total of 1466 survey responses. In this article, we analyse the 116 survey responses returned by ANZ criminologists.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> While we recognise the potential benefits of extending the scope of the analysis to also include other countries under focus in our broader research, we have decided to focus specifically on the Australian and New Zealand context so that we do not sacrifice ‘depth’ for ‘breadth’ in the analysis. Given that a number of research participants’ responses were relevant specifically to the Australia and New Zealand social and political context, we have sought to maintain this focus in our analysis and discussion.

Timely responses from international survey participants were facilitated by the online survey tool, *Survey Monkey*, which we used to design and host our survey questionnaire. Our questionnaire and broad Internet survey-centred approach is also indebted to the instruments and approach of the LSE GV314 Group (2013) in their study of British politics scholars' news media engagement, and Lupton's (2014) study of academia and social media. Survey participants were primarily recruited via email; however, as a second recruitment strategy, we posted advertisements and links to the project's website on our LinkedIn, Twitter and Academia.edu accounts, and encouraged our online connections to share or re-tweet these posts.

### *Sample*

The survey ran between 10 August 2017 and 10 April 2018. During this period, 116 complete responses were received from researchers working in Australia (n.102) and New Zealand (n.14), with respondents self-identifying their gender, academic rank and career stage. Respondents included early career (n.48), mid-career (n.43) and senior researchers (n.25), with most identifying as women in Australia (63.7% = n.65) and New Zealand (57.1% = n.8) respectively. A further 36.2% of survey respondents (n.37) in Australia and 35.7% (n.5) in New Zealand identified as male, while one participant from New Zealand identified as gender fluid.

To avoid the shortcomings of 'opt-in' Internet survey sampling, we generated our own sampling frame using publicly available information on criminologists employed at higher education teaching and research universities in Australia and New Zealand. While it may be the case that criminologists outside of academic institutions, working instead for private industry or government organisations such as the Australian Institute of Criminology, may be more limited than academics in their professional public media engagement, and otherwise

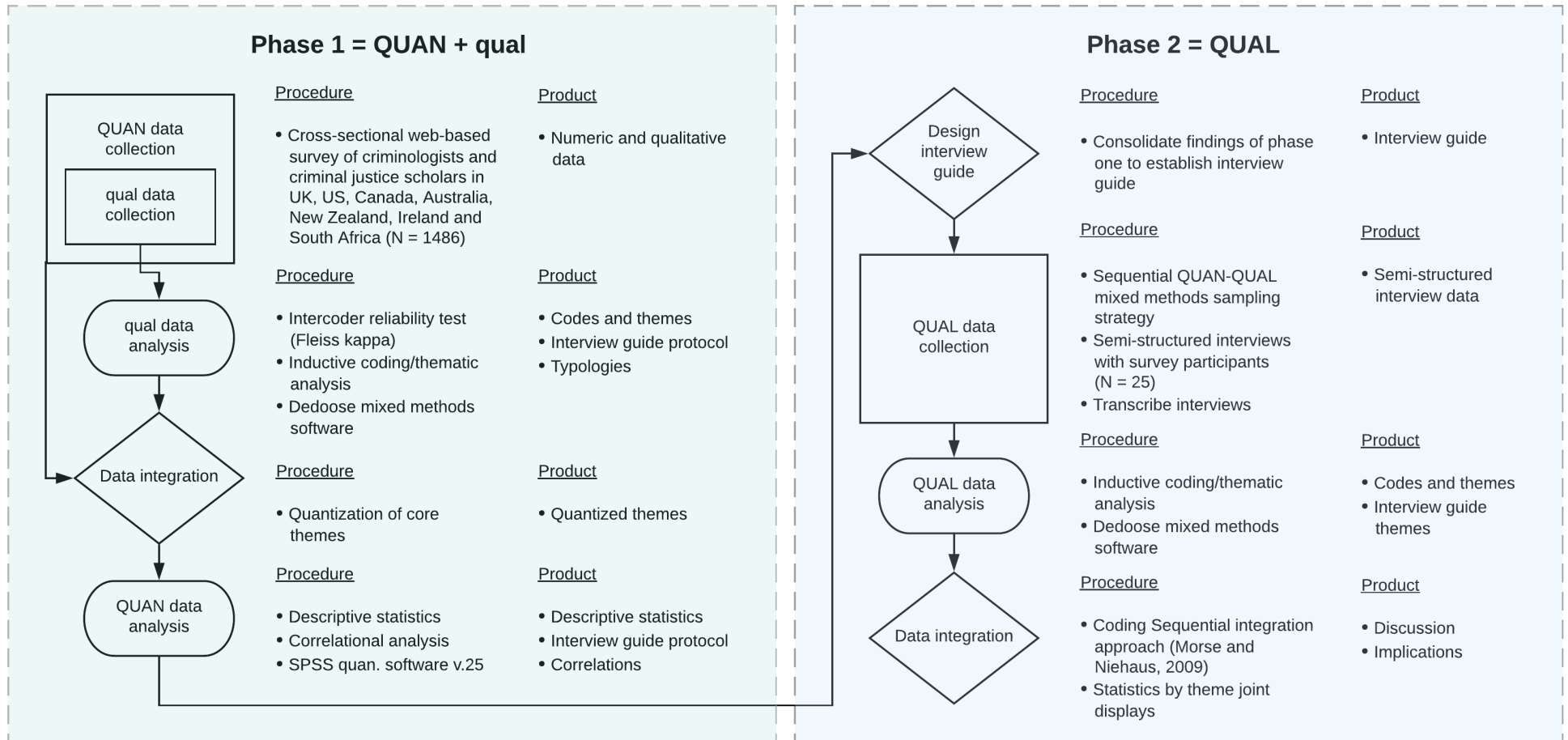
encounter a number of interesting considerations regarding research dissemination, these individuals and their views are not the subject of our research. In keeping with the academia-oriented scope of our research, we identified potential participants for recruitment by referring to biographical and contact information on university websites. Although this recruitment approach has its limitations (see Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015), we strove to ensure representativeness in our sample of responses by contacting a broad and inclusive range of ANZ university-affiliated criminologists.

Further to our open source sampling method, a number of other potential limitations of the methodology in this research may be identified. While our methodology was cross-sectional and allowed us to draw inferences about social media use among ANZ criminologists, it did not enable us to highlight causation in relation to the variables we examined. Furthermore, given that our questionnaire did not measure self-identified personality traits, for example, ‘extroversion’ or ‘introversion’, we could not account for their impact on individual criminologists’ social media practices. Several participants in fact noted that they avoided engaging with ‘the media’ because they were introverted, indicating that the correlation between self-identified personality variables and social media engagement represents a potentially valuable avenue for future research. Finally, although it may be less of a limitation and more of a ‘thought bubble’ for future research, we did not triangulate our survey and interview data with publicly available observational data on criminologists’ social media behaviour. Such naturalistic data could serve to not only compliment and corroborate findings from participatory research projects such as ours, but might also extend our understanding of issues facing academic researchers online, including their potential experience of trolling, harassment, and abuse.

## **Phase Two: Interviews**



The second phase of our research involved semi-structured interviews with 24 criminologists and criminal justice scholars in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. From the sample of survey participants who expressed an interest in participating in a follow-up interview, we purposively sampled participants for maximum variation along the lines of: (a) their academic rank; (b) their identified gender; (c) the country in which they reside; and (d) their responses to survey questions. To this end, the interviews added insight into key trends and frequencies that emerged in the survey data.



**Figure 1.** Research design diagram

## Findings

### What social media are ANZ criminologists using in their professional lives and which media do they find most useful?

Survey responses indicated that Academia.edu, ResearchGate and Twitter were the most widely used social media platforms by ANZ research participants in a professional capacity, with 54.3% of respondents indicating that they used Academia.edu and/or ResearchGate, while 45.6% used Twitter (Table 2). Correspondingly, ANZ respondents indicated that, to a greater extent than other platforms, they found these three to be the most useful in promoting their academic work (Table 3).

**Table 2: Social media used by ANZ criminologists in a professional capacity**

Social media	No	Percentage
Academia.edu	63	54.3
ResearchGate	63	54.3
Twitter	53	45.6
LinkedIn	52	44.8
Facebook	32	27.5
Google+	12	10.3
YouTube	9	7.7
Personal blog	8	6.8
Multi-authored blog	3	2.5
Wikipedia	3	2.5
Instagram	2	1.7
SlideShare	1	0.8
Does not use any social media	13	11.2
Other	6	5.1
Missing	17	14.6
<b>Total: 116</b>		

The apparent importance of Twitter to survey respondents may perhaps be interpreted as reflective of a broader movement in ‘e-public sociology’ (Schneider 2017), public criminology, and newsmaking criminology, toward the use of interactive, brief, and open domains such as “websites, blogs and podcasts” (Barak 2007: 93). The move to an ‘open’ and inherently ‘public’ platform such as Twitter for criminologists in particular may, furthermore, be a symptom of the disciplinary emphasis on translational policy impact in the Australian social sciences (see DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz 2018), which is likewise reflected in survey respondents’ discussions of ‘impact’ in the discussion of social media ‘benefits’ further below. At the same time, the use of Twitter by ANZ criminologists is likely related to a co-occurring situation in which academia and advocacy tickertapes on Twitter, guided by preferences and the algorithmic ordering of information for circles of followers (Powell et al. 2018), are at times accused of fostering conversations between researchers and (in a lesser capacity) practitioners, while these conversations may not reach the subjects or intended public audiences of criminological research (see Loader and Sparks 2011). As will also be discussed below, certain respondents were mindful of this risk and actively sought to engage diverse publics through their social media activity.

**Table 3: Social media ANZ criminologists find most useful in their professional lives**

Social media	No	Percentage	Percentage of users who find platform useful for promoting their work
Twitter	48	41.3	90.5
ResearchGate	37	31.8	58.7
Academia.edu	33	28.4	52.3
Facebook	24	20.6	75
LinkedIn	16	13.7	30.7
Personal blog	4	3.4	50
YouTube	3	2.5	33.3
Multi-authored blog	3	2.5	100
Google+	2	1.7	16.6
None of them	12	10.3	-
Other	5	4.3	-
Missing	13	11.2	-
<b>Total: 116</b>			

For potentially different reasons, academic-oriented social media, such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, were also widely used by survey respondents and deemed useful for promoting their work. This is perhaps related to various characteristics of the platforms, which facilitate access to research, (sometimes bypassing a paywall), research collaborations, and the opportunity to comment on work in related fields, while benefitting from peer review and feedback.<sup>7</sup>

More broadly, it is important to note that while 27.5% of respondents used Facebook, and 44.8% used LinkedIn, only 20.5% stated that they found Facebook useful for promoting their academic work, while only 13.7% of criminologists maintained that LinkedIn was useful. As one of the first-online vocational social media platforms, LinkedIn extends to a number of

---

<sup>7</sup> While opportunities for open access research collaboration and dissemination have long been facilitated by the SSRN repository (circa 1994), this platform does not constitute a ‘social network’, or online, for-profit social media enterprise in the same way as do Academia.edu or ResearchGate. As such, it was not a key focus in our research.

public, private, and professional fields beyond academia and is often referred to (typically outside of academia) by prospective employers. Among several likely reasons as to why LinkedIn was less useful for ANZ criminologists, two appear the most significant. Firstly, LinkedIn targets job seekers outside of academia, and secondly, while still ‘open’, the site is less ‘public’ than Twitter, lacking Twitter’s interlocutory blogging interface, making it less useful in facilitating public debate and discussion (Papacharissi 2009).

### **Why ANZ criminologists use social media in their professional lives**

When considering why ANZ criminologists use social media in their professional lives, we must attend to a number of issues reflected in survey responses. These include most significantly, the social media that respondents are likely to be referring to, the motivations respondents have for engaging with social media in a professional capacity, and the perceived benefits they experience when they do engage with this media. Table 4 sets out the ‘most attractive’ features of social media for respondents, based on their free-text responses.

**Table 4: Most attractive features of social media for ANZ criminologists**

Reason	Australia		New Zealand		Total	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
Publicise research	61	59.8	6	42.8	67	57.7
Public engagement and discussion	55	53.9	6	42.8	61	52.5
Academic profile	45	44.1	4	28.5	49	42.2
Demonstrate the impact of their research	23	22.5	1	7.1	24	20.6
Discipline benefit	21	20.5	0	0	21	18.1
Enjoyment	17	16.6	1	7.1	18	15.5
University publicity	12	11.7	3	21.4	15	12.9
Not needing to adhere to academic language and convention	8	7.8	1	7.1	9	7.7
None of the above	6	5.8	3	21.4	9	7.7
Promotion	8	7.8	0	0	8	6.8
Networking	3	2.9	2	14.2	5	4.3
Drawing attention from funding bodies	4	3.9	0	0	4	3.4

Recruiting participants	3	2.9	0	0	3	2.5
<hr/>						
Total: 116 (including 8 skipped)						
<hr/>						

Two trends regarding the ‘most attractive features of social media’ were immediately apparent and reflected in the large percentages of respondents who favoured social media’s potential to ‘publicise research’, facilitate ‘public engagement and discussion’, and raise a researcher’s ‘academic profile’. These first and third reasons listed are arguably interrelated and indicate an overarching interest on the part of ANZ criminologists to use social media for the purpose of profile raising and academic ‘self-branding’ (Duffy and Pooley 2017). The second attractive feature of ‘public engagement and discussion’ perhaps pertains more closely to researchers’ use of open and public micro-blogging fora, such as Twitter, to communicate work and research findings. This incentive for criminologists to engage with social media too was reflected in participants’ open-ended responses to a question regarding the ‘key benefits of using social media to engage in public criminology’, which we will now address.

### **Broadening Readership**

While a number of ANZ criminologists highlighted social media’s potential to facilitate an expansion and diversification, or ‘broadening’ of their readership (10.3% = n.12), it is necessary to acknowledge that this was often discussed coterminously with other benefits. Of various associations between benefits, three were the most prevalent. Firstly, the association of expanding readership with the pursuit of professional agendas was often rooted in some notion of political emancipation for the subjects of criminological research, and its audiences. Secondly, raising awareness of certain criminological issues, affecting translational social and policy impact by communicating the findings of criminological research, and educating

the public on criminological issues were often broadly related in survey and interview responses (see Currie 2007). Thirdly, respondents expressed a desire to increase the accessibility of criminological research for non-academic audiences through social media apparatus. While these benefits are by no means distinct, they (to a greater or lesser extent) represent differentiated extensions of the overarching aim to ‘broaden’ the scope of social media publics exposed to criminological research.

In the first instance, a major perceived benefit of using social media in the service of social democratisation and for the purposes of political emancipation echoes Carrabine et al.’s (2000; 208) ‘public criminology’ agenda of “promoting social rights” and “undoing social wrongs”. From a political-economic perspective, it arguably reiterates Loader and Sparks’ (2011) well-known entreaty for ‘democratic underlabouring’, and their imploration for scholars to bring ‘heat’ to public discussions about criminological issues. This was evident in survey respondents’ willingness to challenge dominant ‘news media narratives’, which they variously perceived to inaccurately portray the circumstances of socio-politically marginalised populations, and to shed light on issues that are often otherwise misrepresented or misinterpreted in mainstream media, politics, and public domains.

In one noteworthy case, a Senior Lecturer from Australia stated that one of the benefits of engaging with social media in a professional context is that it “gets to a wider audience ... there are many misconceptions about crime and offending so I feel it is the duty of those with knowledge to help disseminate information for the general public to counter misinformation” (Senior Lecturer, Female, Australia). Similarly, a Lecturer in New Zealand argued that social media may be used to challenge false narratives, namely “dominant discourses around crime and justice; [while] trying to centre evidence-based approaches (particularly important



considering current ‘law and order’ politics)” (Lecturer, Gender Fluid, New Zealand). Others in the Australian context agreed that social media may be used to “dispel misinformation about crime and society” and “influence policy through influencing opinion” (Lecturer, Female, Australia), while they otherwise asserted its usefulness in “counteracting popular myths/misconceptions about crime and offending” (Senior Lecturer, Female, Australia).

Both early career and professoriate-level criminologists furthermore highlighted the need to “expose the public to alternative perspectives than those typically presented in conservative mainstream media” (Professor, Female, Australia), and “[provide] the public with the facts they need to get ‘interested’ in a specific topic that might not receive that much TV/Radio attention” (Lecturer, Female, Australia). In line with this sentiment, one Australian mid-career criminologist asserted that social media “provides a legitimate avenue of voicing the experiences of Indigenous peoples that is often ignored by mainstream media and mainstream criminology” (Lecturer, Female, Australia). In this dimension, social and cultural context seemed to have implicit relevance for the imperatives and agendas that would underlie criminologists’ engagement with social media publics. Another mid-career senior lecturer highlighted, for instance, the need to “promote a deeper understanding of criminal justice system and processes in Australia (e.g. miscarriages of justice and their implications)” (Associate Professor, Male, Australia).

While the sense of social responsibility felt by some ANZ criminologists, and their consequent implied mutual integration of social and political values in their media activity was pronounced, the tension between ‘truths’ and ‘values’ in social science research, and the moral questions this raises, was also implicitly acknowledged (for context see Carrier 2014). Although the relevant survey question called for qualitative data on the ‘benefits’ of using social media in a professional capacity, a number of respondents highlighted the need to

communicate research and influence policy, while at the same time engaging in a dialogic and reflexive way with social media audiences.

The philosophical underpinnings of this idea perhaps lie most directly in Bourdieu's (1998) theory that the 'critical collective intellectual' may effectively mobilise in resistance against what he famously described as late modern capitalism's 'utopia of exploitation'. Advocates for this vein of activity may, perhaps, be interpreted in relation to the cogitations of Michael Burawoy (2005), one of public sociology's first major proponents, who called for "dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope" (Burawoy et al. 2004: 104). In relation to the mutual importance of creating impact and promoting dialogue, for example, two early career lecturers respectively cited the reflexive nature of social media and its utility for "networking; hearing of emerging research/issues/policy etc. [and] promoting research" (Lecturer, Female, Australia), as well as "opening up information and ideas to a wider audience, sharing ideas and knowledge, [and] learning from others" (Lecturer, Male, Australia).

Alluding to the exploitation of social media as a vessel for communicating information about issues of contemporary policy relevance, one mid-career criminologist from Australia stated that she used the platforms for "sharing criminological knowledge with wider audiences; demonstrating to students the relevance of criminology to real world issues; networking with other scholars; [and] engaging with contemporary issues" (Senior Lecturer, Female, Australia). Others interested in the dialogic potentialities of social media interaction simply noted the utility of such platforms for "being part of public conversations" (Lecturer, Female, Australia), and "bridging gaps between academics and those outside of academia" (Lecturer, Female, New Zealand).

The notion of ‘bridging’ and overcoming ontological and epistemological divides between criminologists, their subjects, and publics who might engage with criminological research, was from the perspective of several survey respondents, connected to the architecture and affordances of social media platforms themselves. In this aspect, certain respondents expressed particular concern with avoiding the sometimes-observed ‘paternalistic’ nature of public criminology (Ruggiero 2010; 2012); an assertion usefully elaborated by Carrier’s (2014: 89) argument; “the fact that many, if not most, calls for public criminology are premised on a conception of the criminologist as the master of truth on crime and punishment, is not without limitations and paradoxes”. In implicit relation to this issue, a number of survey respondents cited the potential for social media to quickly reach broad and diverse audiences, while these audiences can respond and express their opinions to the researcher and broader public in real time.

Echoing Cass Sunstein’s (2018) concern about social media, intellectual representation, and the limits of ‘direct democracy’, the benefits of social media participation were often, at times, weighed with respondents’ desire to retain control over their own message. With social media communications, as one Senior Lecturer put it, “you are in control of the message” (Senior Lecturer, Female, Australia). Highlighting a related perceived benefit that academic research communicated via social media was available for public consumption without an onerous peer review process, other respondents cited the “immediacy of dissemination vs academic publications” (Lecturer, Female, New Zealand), where social media was observed to offer a “direct audience” without the imposition of an arbitrating “middle man [sic]” (Lecturer, Female, New Zealand). In relation to the role of traditional academic press and news media in message dissemination, certain respondents also foregrounded the benefits of “not needing institutional gatekeepers, having control over what is posted” (Senior Lecturer, Male, Australia), “frame[ing] arguments in your own terms to various publics” (Associate

Professor, Female, Australia), and the fact that “you can say it how it is and it doesn’t get distorted” (Senior Lecturer, Female, Australia).

## **Networking**

Beyond the benefits associated with broadening readership, a small number of respondents (4.3% = n.5) emphasised how social media afforded considerable networking opportunities with other academics, public sector workers and criminal justice practitioners. For some, this online networking occasionally led to academic speaking engagements and other professional opportunities, such as collaborations with other academics and consultations with public sector departments. As noted by one Australian Lecturer:

I have established relationships with new collaborators through social media (particularly Twitter); has helped to establish new academic networks; has meant that journalists and people working in govt/public sector are more aware of my work and have approached me for advice as a result; has assisted in applying for jobs and promotions by illustrating impact and community engagement, relevance of my work to spheres outside of academia. (Lecturer, Female, Australia)

Similarly, in detailing how she had benefitted professionally from her social media use, a Senior Lecturer (Female, Australia) noted:

More people are reading my work and I get invitations to present in government and non-government sectors. It has also resulted in members of the public reading my work and contacting me.

As with previously discussed benefits, the desire to use social media for networking was not always divorced from other perceived social and professional benefits. Networking was often rhetorically associated by respondents with the notion of broadening their readership, and with the wider social function of their research. An Australian researcher asserted, for example, that social media is beneficial for “communicating research to, and engaging in a

dialogue with, the broader public; strengthening the quality of public debate; engaging with other academics outside of your immediate networks” (Lecturer, Female, Australia).

### **ANZ criminologists’ views on using social media in a professional capacity**

There exists the perception that social media is a great polariser in academia, creating both vocal proponents and detractors (Veletsianos 2016). Among the latter, this media is often criticised on a number of grounds, from its ‘time-wasting’ potential – a key criticism among our participants – to claims that it elicits self-promotional behaviour, and a shallow engagement with key issues. Drawing on Orr’s (2010) perspective, we might refer to certain pejorative views of social media as social ‘mediaphobia’. While there were exceptions, and ‘time-wasting’ was cited as a concern by a small number of participants, our survey data provided little evidence of social mediaphobia per se among ANZ criminologists. Few criminologists agreed (7.7%) or strongly agreed (2.9%) that ‘the better criminologists tend to keep off social media’, with most either disagreeing with the statement (39.8%) or neither agreeing or disagreeing with it (38.8%) (Table 5).

**Table 5: ANZ criminologists’ attitudes towards social media**

	Percentage				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is the duty of criminologists to appear on social media to talk about their work	3.8 (n.4)	25.2 (n.26)	33 (n.34)	30 (n.31)	7.7 (n.8)
Criminologists who engage with the public on social media generally improve the standing of the discipline	4.8 (n.5)	33.9 (n.35)	52.4 (n.54)	7.7 (n.8)	0.9 (n.1)
Scholars who discuss research on social media tend to ‘dumb down’ research	1.9 (n.2)	9.7 (n.10)	40.7 (n.42)	44.6 (n.46)	2.9 (n.3)

The better criminologists tend to keep off social media	2.9 (n.3)	7.7 (n.8)	38.8 (n.40)	39.8 (n.41)	10.6 (n.11)
---	--------------	--------------	----------------	----------------	----------------

---

**Total: 103**  
**(including 13 skipped)**

---

When asked a series of related questions regarding criminologists' use of social media, few also disagreed (7.7%) or strongly disagreed (0.9%) that 'criminologists who engage with the public on social media generally improve the standing of the discipline', and few agreed (9.7%) or strongly agreed (1.9%) that 'scholars who discuss research on social media tend to 'dumb down' research'. Respondents were more evenly split on the question of whether 'it is the duty of criminologists to appear on social media to talk about their work', however they skewed towards disagreeing with the statement, with 30% and 7.7% strongly disagreeing. Thus, while marginally more ANZ criminologists did not view digital public criminology on social media as a duty for members of the discipline, they were not, for the most part, critical of those who did engage in such practices.

### **ANZ criminologists' concerns about social media engagement**

Just over 17% of participants (n.20) stated that they had no concerns related to the use of social media in a professional capacity. However, the majority of participants who responded to this question raised at least one concern they had regarding the professional use of social media (Table 6). These ranged from the potential for content to be misinterpreted (6% = n.7), to concerns regarding privacy and the time-commitment involved in using social media effectively (3.4% = n.4). It is worth noting that many of these concerns echoed those expressed in other studies of academics' use of social media (Lupton, 2014), and as such, are not discipline-specific. Five ANZ criminologists, for example, emphasised the adverse time

commitment associated with social media use, with one Senior Lecturer from New Zealand stating:

I don't have time to engage in more work on social media. I think if you are going to use social media then you need to have time to devote to keeping it up to date, re-tweeting stuff, replying to comments etc. (Senior Lecturer, Female, New Zealand)

While most of the concerns voiced by participants were not discipline specific, a number of the most prevalent concerns, including apprehension over trolling (10.3% = n.12), backlash (6% = n.7), and misinterpretation (6% = n.7), were expressed in response to the often 'sensitive', 'contentious', or 'emotive' subject matter criminologists engage with. Indeed, when asked if there were any topics they would avoid discussing on social media (elaborated on further in the following section), a number of participants stated that they would refrain from discussing what they described as particularly 'contentious' or 'controversial topics' (3.4% = n.4), or 'emotive' current events (0.8% = n.1).

**Table 6: ANZ criminologists' concerns about social media<sup>8</sup>**

Concerns	Australia		New Zealand		Total	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
No concerns	19	18.6	1	7.1	20	17.2
Trolling	11	10.7	1	7.1	12	10.3
Backlash	6	5.8	1	7.1	7	6
Communicating complexity	7	6.8	0	0	7	6
Misrepresentation/misinterpretation	6	5.8	1	7.1	7	6
Time commitment	4	3.9	1	7.1	5	4.3
Blurred line between public and private	3	2.9	0	0	3	2.5
Contentious/undesirable debates	3	2.9	0	0	3	2.5

<sup>8</sup> Due to the low response rate across some categories, these have been removed from the table.

---

<b>Total (including 26 skipped)</b>	102	100	14	100	116	100
---	-----	-----	----	-----	-----	-----

---

## Harassment and trolling

By far the most common concern ANZ criminologists had about using social media was becoming a target of online abuse, harassment or ‘trolling’ as several respondents put it (10.3% = n.12). In stating this, it is important to note that the term ‘trolling’ is a nebulous one that has shifted in common parlance from its former, more specific use. Originally conceptualised as the practice of making provocative and inflammatory statements online to elicit a response, the term trolling is now commonly used to refer to generic practices more akin to online abuse, harassment and ‘flaming’: hostile personal attacks made against another online (Beckett 2017). Trolling might, for some academics, represent unsolicited, inflammatory comments designed to ‘bait’ users into an argument. Given the recent change in meaning of the term, however, for other respondents the current potentiality of the troll is likely a far more nefarious and threatening one than the threat of ‘trolls’ as they were formerly represented. Indeed, several respondents stated that their primary concern was threatening rather than annoying or inflammatory exchanges online. In particular, a number of female scholars singled out gendered, sexualised and/or racialised online abuse as a particular concern in their professional use of social media. As noted by one Australian Associate Professor:

Women and racialised minorities are abused, harassed, and threatened via social media on a regular basis. I don’t think the Uni understands the risks of asking us or our students to use social media, and I don’t think the Uni would have my back if I were being attacked via social media. (Associate Professor, Female, Australia)



This concern was similarly raised in Lupton's (2014) survey exploring academics' social media use, in which she found that numerous respondents had little confidence they would receive institutional support in the event they were harassed or threatened on social media.

## **Backlash**

After trolling, the second most common concern about social media voiced by criminologists was the potential for backlash, in a number of forms. Though a number of respondents provided no detail on the nature of the backlash they feared from social media, several singled out occupational backlash as a chief concern. As one Lecturer in Australia stated:

I am very recent out of my PhD, so I am cautious and not confident in my ability to promote my research to larger, more general public audiences. I would worry that something I wrote on social media could reflect badly on me which would not be advantageous to my career. (Lecturer, Female, Australia)

The above lecturer's comments reflect a longstanding concern scholars in a number of fields feel over public backlash – a concern that pre-dates but has perhaps been amplified by social media. Occupational backlash may, however, also take other forms. One Australian Professor, for example, emphasised the potential for social media to correlate with a perceived conflict between advocacy and neutrality; a conflict that can have flow on effects when funding bodies use social media for 'intel' on researchers:

Funding bodies and organizations that are being researched use social media as 'intel' to assess your credentials. Social media erodes a researcher's sense of neutrality. The things you retweet or share or post convey a clear picture of you personally, professionally and politics that is very public - and that creates risks for funding, fieldwork and even collaborations. (Professor, Male, Australia)

In the domains of crime and justice in particular, those who promote intersections between activism and scholarly research, sometimes termed 'scholactivism' (Kramer 2016; Ramsey 2018), might seek to emphasise the onus of responsibility academics at public universities

have to share their research and broadly seek to effect progressive social and political change. In Australia during the last decade, for instance, scholactivism has developed in response to xenophobic news media narratives about high-profile crime-related situations (see Powell et al. 2018). As statements such as the above indicate, however, a key tension exists between the desire of some researchers to advocate for particular policies, and the occupational necessity to appear neutral, or relatively ‘objective’ to criminal justice practitioners and political stakeholders. We would stress that this issue may become further exacerbated by conservative professional-political mores, and by ‘collapsed contexts’ in which Twitter and Facebook blur once clearly demarcated boundaries between private and public media use (Davis and Jurgenson 2014).

### **Topics ANZ criminologists avoid discussing on social media**

Criminology is therefore a discipline that, perhaps more than any other social science, is characterised by the ‘sensitive’ nature of its subject matter. The ‘emotive’ nature of crime and crime control can, in fact, partly account for the ‘hot climate’ of contemporary public discourse around crime and penal policymaking, that Loader and Sparks (2011) diagnose and describe as unique to 21<sup>st</sup> century social and political situations. As alluded to in the previous section, this ‘hot climate’ of contemporary public discourses in relation to crime and criminal justice is acutely felt by many criminologists engaging with the public on social media, whose interactions range from heated all the way to outright flaming, harassment, and abuse.

Equally revealing in this respect were topics that participants indicated they would avoid discussing on social media (Table 3). While most of these were not explicitly identified as ‘sensitive’ or ‘controversial’ issues by participants, many bear all the hallmarks of issues that fall under one or both of these discursive umbrellas. Among the topics mentioned by

numerous participants, for example, were sexual offending or ‘sex crimes’ (4.3% = n.5), race and crime (3.4% = n.4), offender rights (2.5% = n.3) and gender (2.5% = n.3).

On the other hand, despite the afore-discussed concerns raised over backlash, abuse, and misinterpretation, only 14.6% (n.17) of participants indicated that they would avoid discussing specific topics publicly on social media. Most participants, by contrast, stated either that there were no topics they would avoid discussing on social media (26.7% = n.31), that there were probably no topics they would avoid (2.5% = n.3), or that they would discuss anything but be mindful of their approach (6.8% = n.8). Others indicated that the only material they would avoid discussing publicly online would be unpublished findings (1.7% = n.2), issues they were not an expert in (1.7% = n.2), or content that would threaten the confidentiality of participants (1.7% = n.2).

Within the context of criminology, these findings certainly challenge increasingly prevalent accusations levelled at academia for its observance of ‘political correctness’, where academics are criticised for censoring their communications and avoiding issues that might be perceived to exclude or marginalise socially disadvantaged groups (see Lukianoff and Haidt 2015; Kitrosser 2016). Contra to these accusations, the overwhelming majority of ANZ participants stated that there were no topics they would avoid discussing. We highlight this fact, not to undermine or treat with disregard the perspectives of academics who do avoid discussing particular topics online. Several participant responses indicated, understandably, that a reluctance to discuss certain issues can be the result of former negative experiences with online engagement, including incidents of severe harassment and abuse.

## Conclusions

In summary, the ANZ research participant responses examined in this paper demonstrate that social media has, for both good and ill, changed the terrain for researchers to practice public engagement and communicate criminological scholarship. It has, for one, created accessible avenues for criminologists to engage with the public on criminology scholarship and for the public to engage with the discipline. As noted by Schnieder (2015: 41) and Powell et al. (2018: 199), an ‘e-public criminology’ or ‘digital public criminology’ facilitates new forms of ‘newsmaking’ within the discipline of criminology, while at the same time providing for reflexive engagement with stakeholders of criminology, and the subjects of criminological research, such that an emergent crime research and social media nexus has the potential to be both democratising and dialogical.

Specific benefits of engaging with social media noted by participants beyond its broad-based democratising potential include broadening the readership of their work, extending their reach to a global audience, and meeting expectations related to their institutional affiliations. Respondents also cited the potential for social media to increase the international traction of their research, thereby enhancing opportunities for future research collaborations, research recognition, and policy and social impact. From a professional perspective, networking was identified as a leading benefit of engaging with social media to discuss research. It was deemed to provide a forum for researchers to network with other academics, stakeholders, and criminal justice practitioners, while at the same time receiving feedback from and providing representation to those most affected by discourse on criminological issues. For respondents, these were also significant professional considerations insofar as social media provide scope for criminologists to publicise their research and enhance their academic profile.

Despite their myriad benefits, other aspects of the research indicate that social media are not a panacea for the ills facing public criminology. Survey and interview participants highlighted potential limitations of social media for criminological engagement, including harassment and trolling, particularly in relation to research conducted by and in relation to socially marginalised groups such as women, and people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Respondents also cited the potential for social media engagement to elicit and facilitate backlash against criminologists – for example, where the distinction between advocacy and neutrality becomes blurred. Reflecting on these limitations, we acknowledge that promoting public criminology in the wake of social media requires scholars to become adept at not only the production of knowledge, but also the dissemination of information. As noted by Stein and Daniels (2017: 14), researchers must “learn how to become translators” for criminological publics, marginalised populations, and lay audiences – a skill that, we argue, carries ethical, logistical, and professional implications in the ‘post-broadcast age’.

## References

- Barak G (1988) Newsmaking Criminology: Reflections on the Media, Intellectuals, and Crime. *Justice Quarterly* 5(4): 565-587.
- Barak G (2007) Doing newsmaking criminology from within the academy. *Theoretical Criminology* 11(2): 191-207.
- Beckett J (2017) The media dangerously misuses the word ‘trolling’. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-media-dangerously-misuses-the-word-trolling-79999> (accessed 28 July 2018).
- Bourdieu P (1998) *Acts of resistance: Against the new myths of our time*. London: Polity Press.
- Burawoy M, Gamson W, Ryan C, Pfohl S, Vaughan D, Derber C and Schor, J (2004) Public sociologies: A symposium from Boston College. *Social problems* 51(1): 103-130.
- Burawoy M (2005) For public sociology. *American Sociological Review* 70(1): 4-28.
- Burdick A, Drucker J, Lunenfield P, Presner T and Schnapp J (2012) *Digital Humanities*. Cambridge, US: MIT Press.
- Carrabine E, Lee M and South, N (2000) Social wrongs and human rights in late modern Britain: Social exclusion, crime control, and prospects for a public criminology. *Social Justice* 27: 193–211.
- Carrier N (2014) On some limits and paradoxes of academic orations on public criminology. *Radical Criminology* 15(4): 85-114.
- Currie E (2007) Against marginality: Arguments for a public criminology. *Theoretical Criminology* 11(2): 175-190.
- Daniels J and Thistlethwaite P (2016) *Being a scholar in the digital era: Transforming scholarly practice for the public good*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Davis JL and Jurgenson N (2014) Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society* 17(4), 476-485.

- DeKeseredy W and Dragiewicz M (2018) Introduction: Critical criminology: Past, present, and future. In W DeKeseredy and M Dragiewicz (Eds). *Routledge handbook of critical criminology*. London, UK: Routledge: 1-12.
- Duffy ED and Pooley JD (2017) "Facebook for Academics": The Convergence of Self-Branding and Social Media Logic on Academia.edu. *Social Media + Society* 3(1): 1-11.
- DeKeseredy W (2011) *Contemporary Critical Criminology*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Giroux, H (2002) Neoliberalism, corporate culture, and the promise of higher education: The university as a democratic public sphere. *Harvard educational review*, 72(4): 425-464.
- Kitrosser H (2016) Free Speech, Higher Education, and the PC Narrative. *Minnesota Law Review*, 101: 1987-2064.
- Kjellberg S (2010) I am a blogging researcher: Motivations for blogging in a scholarly context. *First Monday* 15(8): np.
- Kramer, R (2016) State Crime, the Prophetic Voice and Public Criminology Activism. *Critical Criminology*, 24(4): 519-532.
- Lee M and McGovern A (2013) *Policing and media: public relations, simulations and communications*. London: Routledge.
- Loader I and Sparks R (2011) *Public Criminology?* London, UK: Routledge
- LSE GV314 Group. (201) Scholars on Air: Academics and the Broadcast Media in Britain. *British Politics* 9(4): 363-384.
- Lukianoff G and Haidt J (2015) The coddling of the American mind. *The Atlantic*, 316(2): 42-52.
- Lupton D (2013) *This Sociological Life*: Opening up your research: self-archiving for sociologist. Available at:  
<https://simplysociology.wordpress.com/2013/06/06/opening-up-your-research-self-archiving-for-sociologists/> (accessed 5 April 2017).
- Lupton D (2014) *'Feeling Better Connected': Academics' Use of Social Media*. Canberra,

- Australia: Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.
- Mahrt M and Puschmann C (2014) Science blogging: An exploratory study of motives, styles, and audience reactions. *Journal of Science Communication* 13(3): 1-17.
- Mahrt M, Weller K and Peters I (2014) Twitter in scholarly communication. In Weller K, Bruns A, Burgess J, Mahrt M and Puschmann C (Eds) *Twitter and Society*. New York, US: Peter Lang: 399-410.
- Merrin W (2014) *Media Studies 2.0*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Morse JM & Niehaus L (2009) *Principles and procedures of mixed methods design*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Papacharissi Z (2009) The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New media & society* 11(1-2): 199-220.
- Powell A, Stratton G and Cameron R (2018) *Digital Criminology: Crime and Justice in Digital Society*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Pratt J (2007) *Penal Populism*. London, UK: Routledge
- Ramsey, J (2018) Introducing Scholactivism: Reflections on Transforming Praxis in and Beyond the Classroom. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, (30): 1-37.
- Ruggiero V (2012) How Public is Public Criminology? *Crime, Media, Culture* 8(2): 151-160.
- Ruggiero V (2010) *Penal Abolitionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schneider CJ (2012) Social Media and e-Public Sociology. In Hanemaayer A and Schneider CJ (eds) *The Public Sociology Debate: Ethnics and Engagement*. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.
- Schneider CJ (2015) Public criminology and the 2011 Vancouver riot: Public perceptions of crime and justice in the 21st century. *Radical Criminology* 5: 21-45.
- Schneider CJ (2017) \$#! Sociologists Say: e-Public Sociology on Twitter. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13(2): 78-99.
- Schneider CJ and Simonetto D (2017) Public Sociology on Twitter: a Space for Public Pedagogy?. *The American Sociologist* 48(2): 233-245.



- Solum LB (2006) Blogging and the Transformation of Legal Scholarship. *Washington University Law Review* 84: 1071-1088.
- Stein A and Daniels J (2017) *Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists*. Chicago, US: University of Chicago Press.
- Sullivan J (2017) China Scholars and Twitter. *The China Quarterly*. DOI:10.1017/S0305741017000017.
- Uggen C (2015) Public Criminology and the Social Media Echo Chamber. *Crime, Law & Deviance News* Fall/Winter 2014 -2015
- Uggen C and Inderbitzin M (2010) Public criminologies. *Criminology & Public Policy* 9(4): 725-749.
- Veletsianos G (2016) *Social media in academia: Networked scholars*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Westbrook L and Saperstein A (2015) New categories are not enough: Rethinking the measurement of sex and gender in social surveys. *Gender & Society* 29(4): 534-560.