*Caught between the Impact Machine and the Social Media Machine: theorising the challenge of doing good through public scholarship*

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Here comes everybody….

- Work in progress building on four projects in various stages of completion
- What does it mean for social science to be public? The promise of breaking out of the ivory tower and doing research for the public good (e.g. my early expectations for SI)
- The status, visibility and influence of the social sciences: what constrains them? Access to audiences, interest of gatekeepers, barriers to scholarship.
- The hope invested in social media as a means of 'Occupying debate and making inequality matter' (Holmwood): vast audiences, immediate communication, zero cost and little skill. Social media = comes everybody?
- But the removal of barriers is insufficient and may create new problems in the process. How to theorise the challenge of doing social science for the public good?

(a) The *impact machine* and the *social media machine*: behavioural modification engines, prone to anticipatory escalation, saturated with meaning but plagued by ambiguity, designed but outstrip their designers.

(b) *The public good*: publics are made rather than given, (re)grouping driven by media transformation, goods to be achieved and fought over.
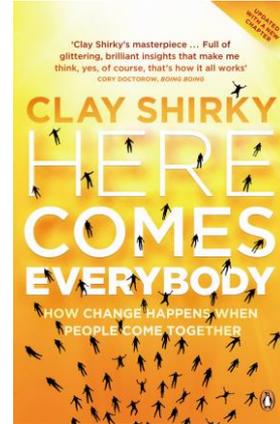
A common sense view of social media has three interlocking characteristics which contribute to a naive conception of digital public social science: <u>the impact catapult.</u>

'Myth of Us' (Couldry)
Misleading view of social media as a profoundly interactive place where everyone comes together.

Hyper-segmentation
Only a segment of a segment of a segment ever see your posts. Difference between imagined and real audience.

Second-order escalation effects
How to be heard above the din (Beer 2014)? The challenge grows as everyone shouts louder and more frequently.

Publish ongoing research updates on blogs, Twitter and other social network sites	Always		Often	
	N	%	N	%
Discipline				
Medical & life sciences	4	1	21	4
Natural sciences & engineering	6	2	20	5
Social sciences	14	3	41	9
Arts & humanities	7	3	25	10
Gender				
Female	15	2	54	7
Male	17	2	53	6
Age				
Under 35	13	2	50	9
35–44	36	3	36	8
45–54	6	2	16	4
55 and over	1	0	5	2
Academic experience				
1–5 years	10	3	27	7
6–10 years	9	2	27	7
11–20 years	9	2	41	9
21 years or more	3	1	9	2

The super users

- A more adequate view of social media for academics (SMA) requires reflexivity about how we discuss SMA
- Zhu and Purdam (2017) sent invitation to 40,000 scholars from random sample of 12 UK Russell Group universities. 1,829 usable responses which are broadly representative of UK scholarly population.
- Identification of 'super users' (always or often publishing research updates) who were associated with *a commitment to the public benefits of communicating research, a belief in the career benefits of engagement, having received training and peer recommendations*.

- Receipt of training and peer recommendations leaves them exposed to social media *doxa*: confident opinions quickly get repeated and become common sense, as authoritative assertions cut through an environment of normative dissensus and practical ambiguity.
- A belief in career benefits leave them with a vested interest in sustaining the growth of social media for academics: the value of online popularity is dependent upon the expansion of users within that field. Network effects in particular social fields.
- A commitment to public benefit implies a categorical assent to online engagement rather than it being a contingent matter to be assessed on case by case basis.
- Super users deeply immersed in and liable to reflect (loudly) on their use of social media platforms i.e. by being more visible online, by being held up as exemplars, by having used these platforms for longer, by contributing to the gray literature.
- Their advocacy can obscure (a) the many harms, challenges and difficulties which social media to generate (b) the everyday character of the agency of academics using social media, with platforms as *ready-to-hand*, tied up in a network of purposes and concerns, encountered by us through our doings and projects rather than their abstract characteristics.
- Their *platform-ness* easily recedes into the background leaving users vulnerable to behavioural prompting: subtle modulations of incentives and disincentives intended to produce changes in user behaviour which register statistically. Which subject orientations make this more or less likely? How do they emerge?

The social media machine

Engagement

➔ Commercial incentives to increase engagement (*Surveillance Capitalism*)
➔ Front stage and back stage analytics measure, filter and promote this engagement.

Stratification

➔ The popularity principle (Van Dijck)
➔ Hierarchies used to filter platform, helping matching people with content and reducing risk of overload.

Algorithmic amplification

➔ Visibility and influence pursued by rising up hierarchy
➔ Engagement operationalised as reaction.
➔ Inherent bias towards polemic, provocation, sentiment, polarisation etc

If *visibility* is the perceived reward of social media then this creates a profound incentive to maximise the reactivity of your content: leading to a cultural race to the bottom as algorithmic amplification (platforms) generates amplification mania (users) through pursuit of followers, reach and reactions because of perceived value.

Are you suffering from amplification mania?

What will success look like?

If you are asked to define criteria of success for your online engagement are platform metrics a measure or a goal?

Do you compare yourself to others?

If you make comparisons to others do platform metrics figure into these? Are they they only consideration?
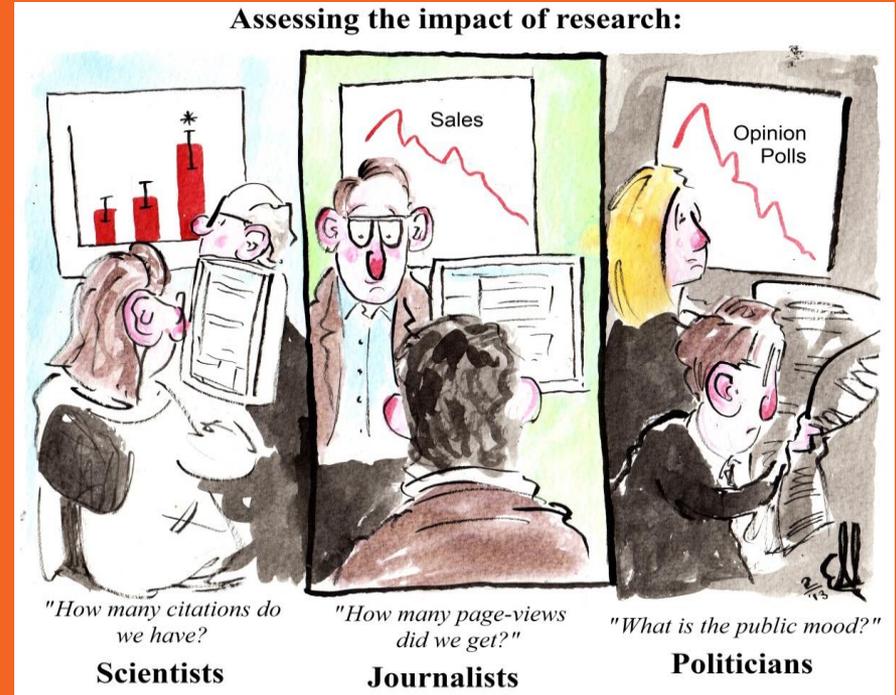
What does success feel like?

Does it feel good when a post is shared widely? Can you explain why it *is* good in terms that make no reference to platform metrics?

Platforms now discourage in name of 'conversational health'. But it has deep roots and it will not go away easily. What non-platform sources are there? Have universities begun to encourage it?

- Impact institutionalised in REF 2014 through introduction of impact case studies, narratives produced by HEIs demonstrating "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia"
- Contentious introduction to research evaluation in the UK, even if it is a continuation of the university's third mission beyond teaching and research (Bacevic). Could it be a source of hope for those doing public social science in their spare time (Back)? A spur for creative engagement (Beer)?
- Impact: *a sheep in wolf's clothing, appearing more hazardous than it really* is (Brewer) or *an existential threat to public knowledge, tying knowledge production to identifiable private stakeholders* (Holmwood)? It "disturbed the comfortable rules of the game by which research reputations and resources were allocated" (Brewer).

Assessing the impact of research:

"How many citations do we have?" **Scientists**

"How many page-views did we get?" **Journalists**

"What is the public mood?" **Politicians**

- Social media platforms became mainstream over a similar timescale. Facebook founded 2004, Twitter 2006, YouTube 2006.
- Their sustained growth *seemingly* promises the potential for impact. "Shorter, better, faster, free" scholarly communication overcoming traditional barriers to engagement (Dunleavy).
- Relationship is endorsed from the top down e.g. ESRC impact toolkit lists 10 benefits of using social media. Theoretical vacuum e.g. if everyone turns to social media will 'visibility' become more elusive?
- Many intermediaries: impact champions (formal or informal), impact officers, impact consultants, impact trainers. Vast gray literature on social media for academics which hasn't been analysed (blog posts, podcasts, slide decks). Common patterns to events ("the morning after we all became social media gurus") the parts of the impact machine
- Bottom up turn to online engagement: people *want* to embrace a public role, alongside other motivations for uptake of social media.

The impact machine

The problem of impact

➔ How do we embed a culture of impact?
➔ Searching for proxies for impact capacity and impact willingness

Best practice spreads

➔ Operational ambiguity creates tendency for 'best practice' to spread
➔ Front stage and back stage analytics measure, filter and promote this engagement.

Escalation dynamics

➔ Semantic overload as byproduct of behavioural change
➔ Anticipatory acceleration under conditions of uncertainty

What happens when the social media machine meets the impact machine?

- Strategic problems the *social media machine* creates for the *impact machine*: amplification mania will obscure the impact interface (Bastow et al 2014) where the important work takes place, as well as the power of social media at it e.g. sustaining weak ties with stakeholders.
- Strategic problems the *impact machine* creates for the *social media machine*: leading to instrumentalized engagement subordinated to project time (Ylijoki 2016) ill equipped for the sustained work of encouraging an audience to coalesce.
- Can we escape the social media machine and the impact machine? What is left over after we evade their inducements?