

Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, ‘hot potatoes’ and having ‘enough of experts’

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Abstract

Drawing upon lived experiences, this article explores challenges facing feminist academics sharing work in the media, and the gendered, raced intersections of ‘being visible’ in digital cultures which enable direct, public response. We examine online backlash following publication of an article about representations of Meghan Markle’s feminism being co-opted by the patriarchal monarchy. While in it we argued against vilification of Markle, we encountered what we term *distortions of research remediation* as news outlets reported our work under headlines such as ‘academics accuse Meghan of dropping feminism like a hot potato’. Negative responses were polarised: anti-Meghan (drawing upon racist, anti-feminist, pro-empire, pro-Brexit/Trump rhetoric), and pro-Meghan (both general royal enthusiasts, and a smaller subsection viewing Markle in terms of politicised black uplift). In response, we received accusations of sexist, racist bullying, debate over definitions of feminism, claims feminism has gone ‘too far’, variously worded directives to ‘shut up’, gendered personal insults, and threats of doxxing. This article examines the tenor of public discourse around feminism and visible feminists. It questions the responsibility of institutions benefiting from public intellectuals for the wellbeing of employees in the public eye, particularly in the anti-intellectual socio-political context of Brexit and Donald Trump, where the costs for ‘visible’ women and feminist activism are ever higher. It also considers our responsibility as researchers to ensure our contributions to public discourse do not exacerbate existing harms of a white-supremacist, classist society. This article interrogates the risks

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– of misrepresentation, hyper-visibility, and reputational, psychological and potentially physical harm – faced by those engaging in acts of public feminism.

Keywords

Academic impact, backlash, Brexit, digital media, feminist research, Meghan Markle, online abuse, social media, trolling

Introduction

In December 2018 *The Sunday Times* informed us that they would be covering our research on representations of Meghan Markle. They published a story based upon a journal article of ours which argued that the monarchy co-opted Markle's feminist rhetoric:

... to construct a performance of progress [as misogyny proliferates] whether in the US presidency, online trolls, or neo-nazis. [This benefits] a British monarchy keen to set themselves apart from these other forms of patriarchy and to mask [...] their own intensely problematic relationship with issues of race, gender, class and religion. What is at stake here is much more than representations of one woman; [...] it is the meaning of feminism itself as popularly understood. (Clancy and Yelin, 2020: 3)

Our work on these proliferating misogynies soon brought us into first-hand contact with them. While the body of *The Sunday Times* article represented our work reasonably well, the title 'Academics accuse Meghan Markle of dropping feminism like a hot potato' proved problematically inaccurate (Leake, 2018). This version of the story, rather than our own, was reproduced by other publications. Yelin appeared live on Sky News explaining that our work was not 'about scrutinising Markle herself and it's certainly not about policing anybody else's feminism' (Sky News, 2018), but the tagline included *The Sunday Times*'s 'hot potato' line in quotation marks, as if we said it. Other sensationalist headlines included 'academics blast royal transformation' (Yedroudj, 2018) and 'Meghan Markle slammed by academics' (Maloney, 2018). The social media backlash soon began, with polarised negative responses: anti-Meghan (drawing upon racist, anti-feminist, pro-empire, pro-Brexit/Trump rhetoric), and pro-Meghan (both general royal enthusiasts, and a subsection viewing Markle in terms of politicised black uplift). In response, we received accusations of sexist, racist bullying, debate over definitions of feminism, claims feminism has gone 'too far', variously worded directives to 'shut up', gendered personal insults, and threats to doxx – scrutinise and expose – our private lives. At the time of writing, a year later, this harassment continues with regularity.

Our article discussed how Markle's feminism was co-opted by the monarchy. Our own feminist argument was, in turn, co-opted as part of increasingly negative media coverage of Markle. Despite celebratory coverage of the royal wedding, the UK media have since critiqued Markle for everything from wearing black nail varnish (Bet, 2018) to over-enthusiastically cradling her baby bump (Whitfield, 2019). Racist and sexist abuse of Markle proliferated online. Supporting Laura Parson's (2019: 576) finding that

‘opposition to academic feminist work builds [. . .] in reaction to the recontextualization of the research instead of responding to the research itself’, a misrepresentation of our work was co-opted to further an agenda we explicitly disagreed with. We term this the *distortions of research remediation*. The very institutions we critiqued for misrepresenting Markle’s feminism did the same to us to further their newly-developed anti-Markle agenda.

The media attention and subsequent abuse left us with concerns about doing impact work while female. As feminist scholars have shown, trolling, sexually explicit emails/messages, cyberbullying, rape threats, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, cyberstalking and doxxing are part of a ‘continuum between online and offline manifestations of technology-facilitated violence’ against women (Ging and Siapera, 2018: 516; see also Cole, 2015; Day, 2013; Jane, 2016; Yelin, 2020). While UK universities pressure scholars to disseminate their work in inter/national media outlets, and/or host public social media profiles, they pay little attention to potential risks beyond institutional reputation. Heather Savigny calls for a ‘politics of ethics which acknowledges the intersectional nature’ of impact work, particularly how ‘policy agenda disproportionately impacts negatively on a diversity of women’ (2019: 14). Our intention is not to dissuade feminist academics from public engagement work, which has vital activist potential. Rather, we reflect upon lived experiences of the risks of visibility. Indeed, universities’ lack of attention reflects wider understandings of gendered online abuse, where women’s claims are ‘frequently trivialized, mocked, regarded as a personal matter and framed as legally intractable’ (Jane, 2016: 287), or individual women are blamed and shamed (Ging and Siapera, 2018; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017).

Our experiences as intersectional feminist academics take on new significance in the current socio-political climate. This is the age of Brexit (the campaign for Britain to leave the European Union, which ranged from vague nostalgic echoes of Britain’s imperial history, to explicitly xenophobic anti-immigration messages), Donald Trump’s presidency, and rising far-right movements supporting racist and anti-gender policies, new misogynies, anti-intellectual ideologies, and pro-empire rhetoric. These groups overlap in certain interests and have a shared strategy of authoritarian populism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). However, given the divisions across a right-wing that cannot be conflated as one coherent political movement, it is notable that responses to our research coalesced around these overlapping discourses. Indeed, the anti-Markle campaign is unusual in how visible it renders links between gendered/racial abuse and political extremism. Markle has such a proliferation of discourse around her that she is a useful tool for those spreading their agendas online. Data analysts connected pro-Meghan Twitter accounts to Russia in their bot-like posting frequency: 1000 ‘highly-connected’ accounts produced 2.5 million posts between September 2018 and March 2019 (Tominey and Furness, 2019). Anti-racist advocacy group Hope Not Hate analysed over 5000 tweets containing anti-Meghan hashtags and found 70% came from just 20 accounts, suggesting they were created specifically to spread racist and sexist abuse (Foster, 2019). As well as Markle-themed hashtags like #Megxit, the tweets and bios included right-wing political hashtags like #Brexit and #MAGA (Trump’s campaign slogan, ‘Make America Great Again’), and links to far-right websites and commentators (Foster, 2019).

Theodore Koulouris argues that, to understand its 'vehemence', online misogyny must be seen as 'the articulation of an increasingly powerful far-right populism buoyed by reenergised forms of post-crisis neoliberalism' (2018: 758). Of his experiences of being 'sexualised, objectified and feminised' by fans of populist, far-right political figures, he concludes there is 'no possible abuse . . . outside a discourse in (and for) which "woman," the "female body," and "femininity" are perennial objects: to be used, evaluated, exploited, degraded, humiliated' (2018: 751). That our 'trolls' support figures like Trump demonstrates how new 'authoritarian populisms' (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) (re)embrace patriarchal forms of power. We therefore question the moral responsibility of institutions benefiting from public intellectuals for the wellbeing of employees in the public eye, in a socio-political context with ever higher costs for 'visible' women, people of colour, trans folk and feminist activism (Mendes et al., 2018).

This article weaves an account of the online abuse of Markle with that which we experienced. In fact, many comments left us unsure whether the author was referring to us or Markle. These consistencies invite consideration of the multiple injuries experienced by (a diversity of) women in (various versions of) the public eye. We have not experienced the level of abuse Markle faces. Recently, she thanked an interviewer for checking she was okay, agreeing that the 'pressures of life in the spotlight' took a 'toll' (Lippiett, 2019). Our white privilege insulates us from the racial abuse she experiences (likewise, being cis-gender and the absence of visible disability insulate us from transphobic or ableist abuse). While online abuse predominantly affects women, this is exacerbated for women of colour: Diane Abbott, for example, received 45% of all abusive tweets targeting female MPs around the 2017 general election (Amnesty, 2018). Such abuse distributes the penalties of visibility unequally, with ramifications for those entering public-facing fields such as politics, academia and celebrity.

Methodology

This article examines below-the-line comments on national news websites and tweets on their corporate Twitter accounts responding to coverage of our research. When quoting these empirical data, we do not correct grammatical errors and typos in order to reproduce the comments exactly as they were created. This work is necessarily 'qualitative, interpretive', seeking understanding of 'online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2006: 135). For a sense of scale, our research was remediated in upwards of 40 titles globally. Taking just one example of those, the *Daily Mail* article had over 2400 below-the-line comments. Rather than a systematic analysis quantifying the proportion of negative/positive coverage, we analyse textual address through chosen language, conducting comparative analyses of thematic overlap to consider gender in relation to public academia, and the climate into which our feminist work is released.

This is not unusual in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies. What is somewhat non-standard is that our data consist of tweets and below-the-line comments *about, and directed at, us*. It is best described as virtual *autoethnography*, drawing on feminist autoethnographies which 'incorporate personal, reflexive dimensions [. . .] to shed light

on how domination is reproduced in everyday life' (Allen and Piercy, 2005: 155). Neutrality is impossible when analysing abusive material written about oneself, therefore we do not seek dispassionate objectivity. Rather, 'rendering visible individual experiences enables us to make sense of the ways in which structural contexts operate' (Savigny, 2020: 13). We anonymise comments, as Casey Fiesler and Nicholas Proferes argue for 'respect', 'beneficence' and 'justice' to meet the ethical challenges of analysing 'public social media data' (2018: 1–2). Of course, these ethical challenges are equally applicable to pressures upon researchers to engage in online impact work. Additionally, in our case, these ethical issues implicate us as the subjects of said tweets. Textual, contextual and discursive analyses illuminate connections between the neoliberal dictum of impact, gendered risks of visibility, and the anti-intellectual, anti-feminist, pro-empire Brexit/Trump era.

Impact or perish

UK higher education has been neoliberalised as a private investment to be bought, sold and consumed (Taylor and Lahad, 2018). Simultaneously, under increased micro-management practices, academic work is audited for its value, or rather, *value for money*. All academic knowledge is now accounted for its 'usefulness' under the impact agenda. Feminist research has long identified a culture of 'publish or perish' (Spender, 1981), whereby 'success' is judged on 'productivity'.

Whilst sharing work beyond academia has activist potential, and can be personally rewarding, corporate impact agendas objectify research. The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) exacerbates this, rating publications via a '4 star' system of 'value'. The 2014 introduction of the REF Impact component has arguably extended 'publish or perish' into 'impact or perish'. Worth 25% of REF, the government defines impact as 'effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life' (HEFCE, 2018). As Savigny notes, 'this contains positivistic assumptions that impact is only that which can be quantifiably measured' (2020: 2) (value judgements reproduced in the abuse we received). Unhelpfully, what 'counts' as 'impact' has different definitions in different contexts, generating further labour as individuals self-monitor, self-report and self-generate evidence of their contribution, alongside the labour of that contribution in the first place (Gill and Donaghue, 2016).

Academic use of Twitter is encouraged by universities (Stewart, 2016) for impact and neoliberalised 'self-branding' (Oestreicher-Singer et al., 2019). This occurs both as an informal cultural expectation – sharing research, conferences and ideas – and as an explicit directive, including mandatory training on Twitter as a 'pathway to impact'. However, 'visibility has drawbacks', especially for minority groups targeted by racist, misogynist, transphobic or ableist abuse that flourishes online (Stewart, 2016: 62). Misogynistic trolling, as 'a continuum of sexual violence', creates 'the added labour of "safety work"' for female researchers (Vera-Gray, 2017: 61). 'Impact or perish' thus raises questions of personal safety with the risks of visibility unequally distributed on a platform beset with harassment.

‘Shut up you mad mare’: Anti-feminist silencing

The media interest in our article took us by surprise, the backlash even more so. Gendered harassment, familiar tropes, anti-feminist stock responses, and threats of offline harm are a form of social control, in/directly attempting to silence public feminist critique (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). When Sky News tweeted a clip of Yelin’s interview with their presenter (again with ‘dropped feminism like a hot potato’ wrongly in quotation marks), responding tweets called us ‘fucked up’ ‘lunatics’, ‘crawling out of the sewer’ (Twitter.com). Abuse was gendered: Yelin was a ‘Silly little girl!’, ‘These Bitches’ were ‘bitter’, spreading ‘nasty gossip’ (Twitter.com). Gender-based terms like ‘bitch’ are used to make women uncomfortable speaking out (Sobieraj, 2018), the word ‘nasty’ evokes Trump’s harassment of women (Perez Miles, 2017), and gossip is a feminised, delegitimised cultural form. Our supposed bitterness pitted women in competition, characterising us as jealous of Markle’s fairytale wedding.

Commenters used our public discussion of feminism to (re)circulate anti-feminist, homophobic tropes about (our) unattractiveness to men:

Most men would run a mile from a feminist as they are half mad haridans who refuse to shave their pits or nether regions. Ladies who are feminine by contrast are loved by all men.. With the exception of the g a y s of course (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

This demonstrates how ‘when female academics are invited to speak in media in a professional capacity, they are still subject to “the male gaze” ’ (Savigny, 2020: 9). Our mannerisms and femininity were policed:

I caught the end of the interview-when the Sky presenter thanked her- she replied with a sickly sweet shoulder shrugging coy smile (Twitter.com)

Throughout these comments circulate well-worn anti-feminist tropes, familiar sexist characterisations, and vocabulary offering a shorthand for harassing and dismissing publicly-speaking women. This illustrates an enduring culture of ready stock responses to derail feminist discussion. Mary Beard argues that society has a ‘culturally awkward relationship between the voice of women and the public sphere of speech-making, debate and comment’ (2017: 8) and charts 3000 years of men telling women ‘to “shut up” ’ (2017: 3). We had highlighted the silencing of ‘Markle’s activist voice’ (Clancy and Yelin, 2020: 3) and responses continued this tradition: ‘Couldn’t stand 5 minutes of her irritating voice’, ‘SHUT UP YOU MAD MARE’, and ‘This woman sounds like a bell end’ (Twitter.com). Savigny highlights ‘the focus on women’s bodies and appearance as a means to regulate women’ (2020: 9) and we were subject to this gendered scrutiny as a form of indirect silencing. Moreover, this was accompanied by explicit wishes to silence us, the most significant being the implied possibility of offline danger:

let’s look into her life. . . I’m sure it would make good reading (Twitter.com)

these so called academics also need to be scrutinized (Dailymail.com comment)

These comments hint at ‘doxxing’: finding personal data like addresses and phone numbers to expose online, putting the victim at risk of physical harm. This practice disproportionately affects women, people of colour and other oppressed groups (Binder, 2018), demonstrating how the ‘risk’ of being a woman in the public eye contains ‘real life’ impact.

‘Feminism is a spiteful, hate filled ideology’: Feminist research remediation as space for attacking feminism

While our original article argued that the version of feminism in representations of Markle ‘resides in a vague idea of modernisation and makes no reference to equality between the sexes’ (Clancy and Yelin, 2020: 3), in response we had the meaning of feminism explained back to us: a (re)definition that overlooked equality between the sexes:

Feminism is not about women’s rights. As she said in her speech in NZ– feminism is about fairness. That’s all it’s about. Fairness!! Unfortunately, there are always extremist that hijack any movement (Twitter.com)

Here, we are pathologised through the language of terrorism as ‘extremist hijackers’ for suggesting that institutional monarchy is not feminist. It was strange to see our feminist work become a space for the redefinition of feminism, considering that it had identified these very issues with the (mis)uses of feminism in media cultures. While not suggesting that our definition of feminism is the only, or even the right, one, the comments raise serious questions about (mis)uses of feminism in popular discourse. There were, for instance, many incongruous claims that because the monarch is female, the monarchy must be feminist:

These ‘researchers’ seem to have forgotten one crucial point. . . the Queen is at the top! Kind of debunks their whole argument really (Theaustralian.com.au comment)

I may be wrong but I think the queen is a woman [. . .] how much higher can you get in the job chain? (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

These responses not only overlook that monarchy is hereditary, coronating women only for lack of a male heir, and thus rendering ‘job chains’ irrelevant, they also reproduce vague definitions of feminism, whereby being female in a powerful position is automatically feminist, regardless of politics. Our commenters reflect the tenets of neoliberal feminism, which draws on depoliticised notions of liberation through individual women, not structural or institutional inequalities (Rottenberg, 2018).

Some saw public discussion of our work as an opportunity to attack feminism itself. Agreeing with *The Sunday Times*’s statement on ‘hot potatoes’ wrongly attributed to us, some celebrated Markle ‘dropping feminism’ as ‘seeing the light’:

The penny has dropped for her. She’s realised what a dishonest and hypocritical mob the feminists have become (Theaustralian.com.au comment)

Maybe she figured out that feminism is a Cultural Marxist device used to split up men and women and abolish the institution of marriage (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Modern feminism is a spiteful, hate filled ideology. I'm glad she has seen the error of her ways (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Others agreed that Markle had dropped feminism 'because she now has a life' and even 'Cos she's been buggered every Neet' (Twitter.com). While taking pleasure in imagined sexual violence, this commenter obscenely suggests that Markle was forced into submission by Harry through daily anal sex, reflecting the dismissive, abusive, anti-feminist concept of 'she just needs a good fuck', fantasies of phallic power within patriarchy, and the racist trope of the oversexualised black woman. Some celebrated the demise of a movement that has gone 'too far':

Feminism is no longer about women's rights, But, an excuse for sexism anti Men (Twitter.com)

She may have found facts that women now have privileges over men, getting chosen for jobs over men at a 2 to 1 rate (Twitter.com)

Contradictorily, feminism and anti-gender movements were explicitly aligned as comparative 'radical' political movements:

Feminism is so intertwined into toxic politics now, it would be impossible to support most feminist causes without wading into Trump Derangement Disorder (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

This supports Sarah Banet-Weiser's arguments about the co-constitutive relationship between 'popular feminism' and 'popular misogyny', where 'new' powers attributed to women are 'understood as taking that power away from men' (2018: 5), rather than addressing structural inequalities which implicate all genders. This creates a 'funhouse mirror' effect, where 'the injuries caused by centuries of structural racism and sexism are turned on their head so that it is white men who feel these injuries most deeply' (2018: 39). Like the *distortions of research remediation*, digital spaces enable this 'funhouse mirror' to take hold.

'Lefty liberal lobotomised academics': Gendered knowledge production, the spectre of Brexit, and a nation that 'has had enough of experts'

Pro-Trump, pro-Brexit and pro-empire sentiment was intertwined with anti-feminist, anti-intellectual attitudes in abuse levelled against both us and Markle. This hinged on privileging particular kinds of knowledge over others, and judgements over what research (if any) is 'worthy'. Knowledge deemed 'feminised' was disparaged as inferior (Ahmed, 2017):

Sigh wish women would find other ways to feel relevant! Invent something, discover something, build something significant! (Twitter.com)

Why does Sky constantly give a voice the people like this? Seems it's an organisation obsessed with female issues, Brexit, female issues, Brexit, female issues, Brexit. . .etc. You might want to report on some actual in- biased news for once, how about some that include men! (Twitter.com)

The conflation between 'female issues' and Brexit is notable given Hope Not Hate's discovery that many of those producing high numbers of tweets about Markle also tweet right-wing, pro-Brexit hashtags. Indeed, the invention of #Megxit, posted by those rejecting Markle from the monarchy, offers a concentration of these overlapping concerns.² The conflation of '[un]biased news' and news that 'include[s] men' illustrates stereotypical dismissals of female-centred stories as being emotive rather than evidenced, positioning 'male knowledge' as more valuable (Ahmed, 2017). Gendered value judgements also spread to disciplinary derision. Reflecting the history of Media Studies, analyses of 'popular culture' are deemed irrelevant, unworthy of funding and unscholarly (Hall, 1981):

One lectures in Sociology and the other researches Celebrity and Gender issues? Are we really expected to take these people seriously? (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

I have never heard of such rubbish in my life. English Literature and History stood me in good stead; not reading "Hello" magazine (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Our choice of publication in *Celebrity Studies* received scorn for being perceived as what Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (2010: 1) refer to as 'pseudo-academic mumbo jumbo':

Celebrity Studies? This degradation of scholarship should set a new low. Basically - Who cares (Theaustralian.com.au comment)

You know that your work as an academic has failed when you cannot publish in peer journals where your work is critiqued by fellow Phds so you resort to gutter publications (Twitter.com)

It is no coincidence that the subjects dismissed as feminised, degraded, 'low', 'gutter' scholarship are those questioning the status quo. (It is important to note that *Celebrity Studies* is a highly ranked, peer-reviewed journal and leader in its field.)

Running throughout this hostility towards academics is an anti-intellectualism that Brexiteer Michael Gove espoused, claiming 'Britain has had enough of experts' when challenged for importing Trump's 'post-truth' politics in his misleading Brexit campaign (Mance, 2016). Anti-intellectualism and Brexit are related, as both the EU and 'experts' are viewed with suspicion 'as if they are quasi-colonial tools of domination' (Davies, 2018: 60). Some comments even used Trump-esque 'post-truth' language to describe us and Markle as 'fake news':

such laughable, and easily spotted, FAKE news (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

She is fake news (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Ross and Rivers (2018: 2) argue that Trump uses these pejorative labels 'to deter the public from trusting media reports, especially those critical of his presidency', as a populist strategy, positioning news media as a 'corrupt elite' in opposition to 'the people'. One emergent narrative about us, which was wildly fictional, saw anti-Markle protesters interpret our work as a Markle-funded campaign of lies attacking the royals:

They wrote this article paid for by Meghan's PR. Intention is to bersmirch the royal family's name. It is a long game she and her family is playing for the eventual big payout (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Yelin must be on her payroll (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Meghan's paid academics (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

In addition to expressing mistrust, accusations of payment or collusion question our integrity. These discourses also explicitly position Markle as an outsider attempting to destroy the monarchy. This segues with *misogynoir*,¹ where black women experience the violence of misogyny as intersecting with anti-Black racism (Bailey and Trudy, 2018), in coverage where Markle is positioned as an outsider *because* she is not white, hence reproducing racialised hierarchy in elite institutions (Clancy, forthcoming; Smith, 2017).

Davies writes that 'cultural and political divisions [are] separating centres of expertise from other sections of their societies', where 'experts' do not understand 'real life' (2018: 60). Anti-academic sentiment abounded in the *Daily Mail* comments:

Who cares what academics think? Nobody listens to them anyhow (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Academics are of no importance what so ever with their views (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

These comments hinged particularly on an 'ivory tower' idea of academia which is 'outside' of the 'real world':

Academics, need to get out into the real world and do some actual f-Ing work. (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Academics don't live in realville (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Relatedly, many questioned our research's cost to the taxpayer, reflecting wider discourses around the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipient of government funding (Tyler, 2013):

Nice work if you can get it. Paid from the backs of the taxpayers to research nothing of any importance whatsoever. (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Many anti-intellectual comments conflated academia with leftist politics, particularly ideas of academia 'brainwashing' students with leftist views; ideologies associated with right-wing figures like Jordan Peterson:

Lefty liberal lobotomised academics are an embarrassment to our collective history (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

Yelin and Clancy typical far left extremist academics (Thesun.co.uk comment)

Academics are the extreme Leftists indoctrinating our young people. . .the extremist Ivory Tower pc purists will never prevail! (Dailymail.co.uk comment).

One commenter explicitly evoked Jordan Peterson in describing feminism as ‘a Cultural Marxist device’ (Dailymail.co.uk comment), an Alt-Right description Peterson uses to attack ‘Marxist’ use of ‘identity politics’ to undermine ‘traditional values’ (Moyn, 2018). In so doing, anti-intellectual and anti-feminist rhetoric coalesces, demonstrating intersections between misogyny and the far-right. ‘Don’t these snowflake researchers understand that the Royals cannot be political?’ (Dailymail.co.uk comment), asks one commenter. Generation ‘snowflake’ are characterised in right-wing internet polemics as left-wing, politically-correct millennials, too easily offended because of their delicacy. The term was popularised by Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996), issued by Tyler Durden – who is steeped in fantasies of violent and unregulated masculinity – to his comparatively limp counterpart, Jack. These uses of ‘snowflake’ suggest a gendering of the fascism/progressivism divide in attempting to emasculate people for being progressive, just as coding particular academic disciplines as feminine dismisses their value. This illustrates how the ideals of masculine power bubble beneath discourses of right-wing polemicists.

We have examined the overlapping interests of anti-EU and anti-Meghan tweeters, and explicit ‘anti-expert’ sentiment. Now we consider how the spectre of Brexit looms in the comments through fond references to the British Empire: ‘The queen is a feminist. She is figure head of an empire, for goodness sake’ (Dailymail.co.uk comment). This uncritical approach to empire supports 2016 poll findings by YouGov that 44% of people were proud of Britain’s colonial history while only 21% felt regret (Stone, 2016). Other commenters, though not explicitly mentioning empire, echoed this view in veiled terms, adopting a nostalgic lamentation for a lost golden age of inward-looking, British, institutionalised glory, discourses Richards and Smith (2017) identify as central to the ‘Brexit fallacy’:

“Academics” are a complete joke.. Brainwashed by leftist ideology that almost every once credible institution has been purposefully soaked in– and it was entirely orchestrated to be such a way; all meant to contribute to the fall of western society and what once made it the best, in order to push forth the globalist agenda (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

The yearning reminiscence stretched back as far as the 9th century:

Egbert in 827 fought and won the rule of England and there it starts. [. . .] Battles have been fought for that throne. Traditions established. How arrogant to think a B actress from the US no less, has any right or expectation to infringe or “change” the course of tradition of the throne. [. . .] We have plenty of girly boys over here she could have targeted. If I were her I would be busy immersing myself in the history surrounding me (Dailymail.co.uk comment)

This reasserts patriarchal histories of monarchy, and illustrates the centrality of monarchy to fantasies of 'taking back of control' of British national sovereignty (Clancy, forthcoming) (with added homophobia to assert the dominance of masculine men). 'Immersing [oneself] in history' can be read as the perfect euphemism for upholding the status quo.

Ideas of British/Western superiority were further reproduced in comments inviting us to 'move to Iran lots of feminists there' (Twitter.com), an Islamophobic 'joke' hinging upon racist tropes of the subjugated Muslim woman, suggesting that we should shut up and be grateful for our supposed comparative freedom. Likewise, we were mocked for caring about 'trivial' issues such as Markle: 'If this is their most pressing problem then they've got too much time on their hands. Why not jump on a plane to Saudi and help their sisters learn to drive?' (Dailymail.co.uk comment). These comments reproduce colonialist language under the veil of feminist progress, mirroring how Banet-Weiser describes the 'relationship between the creation and expression of popular feminism and [. . .] "popular misogyny"' (2018: 2). Essentially, ideas of Western superiority versus 'the other' are reproduced, but couched in progressive language. This is most visible in one comment: 'Inst it hard enough for the colonial to fit in with the Englo German elite without being stabbed inthe back by sisters yhat o one over here has even heard about?' (Dailymail.co.uk comment). The explicit racism of calling Markle 'the colonial' renders concerns about her 'being stabbed in the back by sisters' concern-trolling at best. Anti-expert, pro-monarchy, pro-empire and patriarchal discourses, then, intersect and reproduce one another in complex ways.

'LOL! She's now become so disliked & so unpopular that even these "academics & feminists" are distancing themselves from her': Navigating online racism while having white privilege

One of the most serious dangers of the *distortions of research remediation* was having our work co-opted by those espousing misogynistic and racist rhetoric and used to further attack Markle. Our explicitly anti-racist work provoked conversations which ended up harming black people. Comments such as, 'LOL! She's now become so disliked & so unpopular that even these "academics & feminists" are distancing themselves from her' (Dailymail.co.uk comment) demonstrate some people's glee at having 'evidence' to support their dislike. Commenters on the *Daily Mail*, for example, used our work to launch attacks:

a woman who gave up her career, friends, family, pet, religion, country for a man with her main duty to make her husband look good. Brings a whole new meaning to feminism (Dailymail.co.uk comment).

She's fake and literally has Harry around her fingers. She also needs to stop clinging onto him all the time- that's not what an independent feminist does (Dailymail.co.uk comment).

Again, many drew on stereotypical, racist constructions of the oversexualised black woman, accusing Markle of dropping 'her underwear' (Dailymail.co.uk comment) in

order to '[take] advantage' (DailyMail.co.uk comment) of Harry and be a 'Committed Social climber' (DailyMail.co.uk comment). This raises concerns about how the *distortions of research remediation* could further agendas with which one explicitly disagrees. The academic publishing lag is a problem, particularly when addressing fast-moving issues such as popular culture in a digital age, as we suspect the timing of our work's publication with the 'negative turn' in representations of Markle was a factor.

Understandably, then, many came to Markle's defence. They responded as if our work was indeed an attack and that we were therefore unaware of our privilege, policing feminism to exclude those from other racialised or classed backgrounds: 'just a bunch of white women gatekeeping on what is considered "feminist" (it's not feminism if it doesn't align with middle class white women's sensibilities)' (Twitter.com). As white women (visible in our social media profile photographs) who represent elite education, we have a responsibility to ensure that our contributions to public discourse do not exacerbate existing harms of a white-supremacist, classist society; indeed we should always be actively aiming for harm reduction. 'White feminism', in this context, refers to the harms that black womanist scholars have demonstrated occur when white women 'focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age' (Lorde, 2017 [1980]: 18). As Audre Lorde argues, 'ignoring differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power' (p. 18).

Our original research was criticising the patriarchal monarchy as an institution, not criticising Markle as an individual. In line with bell hooks, we understand patriarchy as 'imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist' (2013: 143), and argued that these facets of monarchy were being made palatable by a version of celebrity feminism that emphasises individual progress rather than structural change. As hooks argues, 'we have to restore feminism as a political movement. The challenge to patriarchy is political, and not a lifestyle or identity' (in Alpturk, 2017). If we were criticising anyone, we considered ourselves to be 'punching up' towards the monarchy, the literal apex of society. However, some commenters considered us to be 'punching down' as white, academic feminists discussing representations of a woman of colour. We strenuously defend the need for academic feminism, and its important contributions to both activism and wider society's understandings of gendered power relations, and argue that academic feminism must be truly intersectional.

Whilst its economic power is very real, monarchy has a symbolic function. It is a symbol of the enshrined inequality of British society. This is also why Markle's entry as a woman of colour into the monarchy is so important. It represents something otherwise unrepresented: a black woman at the centre of hereditary power in Britain, where, as we have demonstrated, the collective imaginary remains structured by colonialism. Western 'princess culture' is rooted in folklore and associated with repressive ideas of whiteness, femininity and perfection (McCoy Gregory, 2010). As evidenced in positive responses to Markle, for many, having a woman of colour occupy this space of symbolic power is representative of significant progression, regardless of how problematic monarchy might be and of the potential co-option of her values. However, the abuse which implicitly questions her right to be a princess reveals firstly that the strictures of 'princess culture' remain, and secondly that Markle is destabilising these representational boundaries in

ways that anger those invested in an 'imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist' status quo. Markle's entry into the British monarchy undertakes representational progress, shifting collective imaginaries of racialised nobility. Unfortunately, the abolishment of monarchy and the redistribution of their stolen wealth to pay reparations and redress inequality appear not to be happening anytime soon. If work which is explicitly anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and sympathetic to any individual woman around whom such narratives circulate can end up serving racist agendas and harming black people because of the *distortions of research remediation*, we must be careful of the unintended effects of our contributions to public discourse. This is especially so given the capitalist structures that render original research publicly unavailable.

Conclusion: Distortions of research remediation

One challenge of undertaking scholarship on online abuse is that many offensive and threatening tweets were quickly deleted, leaving only the statement 'This Tweet is unavailable' (see e.g. Figure 1). It is impossible to determine whether they were reported and removed, the commenters changed their minds, they were posted by bots/suspended accounts, or they were caught by Twitter's systems for identifying abuse. Whilst their removal is positive in curtailing online abuse, it does not undo the effect of seeing abuse.

Of course, platforms like Twitter encourage extreme content, and algorithms reward polarisation (Lanier, 2019). As such, the binarising debates could not account for a nuanced version of our work: it could not be critical of monarchy without being critical of Markle as an individual; it could not be engaged with popular culture and also be seen as rigorous academic work; it could not address debates about the risks of popular feminism without being an act of privilege – 'policing' the boundaries of feminism.

Our original article addressed issues including women's voice(lessness), policing performances of femininity, anti-feminist backlash and the conservative redefining of feminism and, as this article has demonstrated, these were also central features of reactions to its (and our) mediatisation. However, owing to the restricted access of academic publishing, this is extremely unlikely to be because the commenters had read our original article. Rather, ironically, the same treatment we had identified was then directed at us, because these are common features of the wider cultures surrounding the treatment of (a diversity of) women in the public eye. While the scale may vary, and excepting that as recipients of white privilege we are insulated from racial abuse, the thematic content persists to show that it is not who the woman is (or what she says) that provokes ire, but an enduring culture of ready stock responses to feminism. This takes on a particular imperative at the current political moment. Indeed, as we have shown, being a woman in the public eye *at the time of Brexit and Trump* presents a new set of challenges.

This article has shown how the consequences of backlash fall upon the individual. It was Markle who became subject to racist and sexist abuse, while the monarchy remained insulated. Likewise, in the current REF model, it is individual researchers who weather the risks of visibility, while universities remain largely unscathed. This reflects the neo-liberal university more broadly, which 'seek[s] to constitute us as "individual" subjects of knowledge' in a hyper-competitive environment (The Res-Sisters, 2017: 269). In reflecting on our experiences, we propose some modest recommendations for what

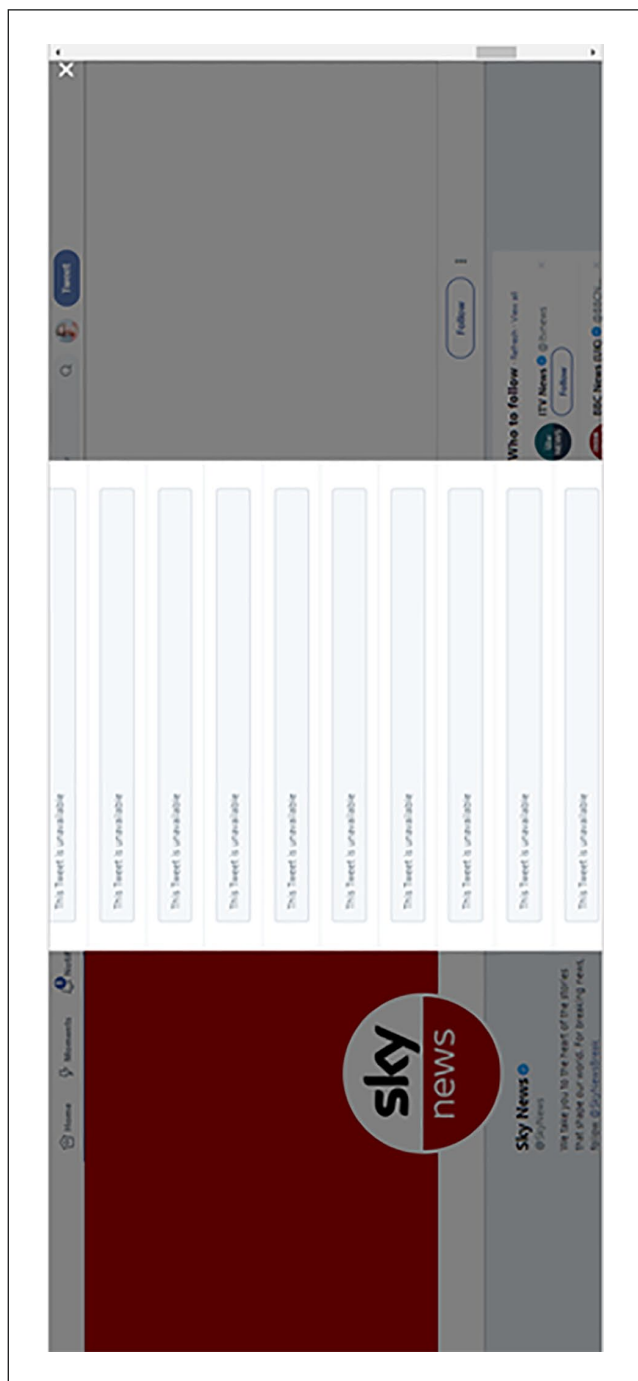


Figure 1. Example tweets deleted since December 2018 (Twitter.com).

researchers and universities can do to support those doing impact work while female. This is not an exhaustive list, rather part of a continuing feminist conversation:

- Write press releases about your research yourself, with support from the university's press office. This gives researchers some control over the framing, and goes some way towards countering the *distortions of research remediation*. *The Sunday Times* found our article and interpreted it themselves, giving us little regulation. Had we offered a more accurate headline, they may have followed our lead (they also might not, and a less sensationalist headline would not have gained such reach).
- Universities have a duty of care to all researchers, not just during the media work, but before and afterwards. It is important for universities to take responsibility for the wellbeing of *all* researchers engaging in impact work which will benefit the academy. Expecting people, particularly women, people of colour and trans folk, to promote their institutions while fending for themselves in a toxic environment is irresponsible.
- If research is mis-represented by one publication, a published correction should be a condition of engagement with other publications. In our case, an early correction of the 'hot potato' headline would have stemmed the hyperreal simulacrum reproduction of something we didn't say.
- Alter the notification settings available on social media sites to give one peace. While this might limit networking opportunities, it is immediate relief to have respite from thousands of constant notifications when something gains 'viral' traction.

Of course, one problem of engaging with media texts in a digital age is that the *distortions of research remediation* can never be entirely controlled, regardless of how well planned the press releases or how many corrections are issued. However, this is not to suggest sharing knowledge beyond the academy should be avoided, whether in the pursuit of 'impact' or not. Rather, it illustrates a growing importance for marginalised and feminist voices to contribute to public debate. The potential abuse should not encourage women in the public eye to withdraw, but rather demonstrates the vitality of continuing to challenge dominant voices and institutional inequalities, with appropriate support. Doing impact work while female is a feminist issue, both in terms of its challenges and its activist potential.

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Notes

1. The term 'misogynoir' was created by Moya Bailey and Trudy (@thetrudz) to describe specific intersecting experiences of racism and sexism (Bailey and Trudy, 2018).
2. Since this article was written, 'Megxit' has been adopted to refer to Meghan and Harry's 'resignation' from royal duties and departure from the UK.

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