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Digital hate, health and safety, and the labour politics of public academia: ‘Universities don’t value this sort of work at all’

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional cultures and contradictions surrounding public-facing academic work in UK universities, particularly in regard to the backlash and harm experienced by those engaging in public discourse. Drawing on survey responses and interviews with academics, professional services and senior management, and speaker accounts from a series of public events, we interrogate how the labour of public academia is simultaneously mandated, quantified, individualised and institutionally marginalised. We evidence the persistent (under)valuing of public academia both in material terms (time, workload, resourcing) and symbolic terms (prestige, legitimacy) within a sector shaped by conflicting institutional logics. This double bind enables universities to promote researcher visibility while absolving themselves of accountability for the vulnerabilities of public exposure. Until public-facing work is taken seriously as work, it will fall outside of institutional frameworks for workplace health and safety, leaving individuals to bear the consequences unsupported. This article contributes to emerging scholarship on the politics of academic visibility and safety in the context of intensified demands for public engagement.

Keywords

digital hate, health and safety, labour politics, public academia, value

Introduction

This article shares data showing how UK universities accumulate reputational capital at the expense of employee wellbeing. The UK Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 asserts

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employers' responsibility to provide employees with 'a safe system of work', 'a safe place of work', and that they must inform 'workers fully about all potential hazards associated with any work process' (TUC, 2022). The integration of digital platforms into work makes health and safety labour laws increasingly difficult to apply given the precarious, remote and autonomous nature of digital labour (Garben, 2019). This is exacerbated by the risk of harm at work caused by digital hate, as online bullying remains challenging for prosecutors given its ephemeral and pervasive nature (Lynch, 2024). While many universities have policies around workplace harassment, few cover online harassment arising from public or media engagement, highlighting how poorly institutions keep pace with evolving social media technologies and their ramifications. For example, the University and College Union (n.d.) website health and safety page offers internet safety guidance, but this is significantly dated, with advice centred on not revealing personal details in chat rooms.

Sharing academic research with wider audiences is important for academics to demonstrate the social relevance of research. UK academics are often implicitly and explicitly encouraged to maintain public profiles (Donelan, 2016) to disseminate work under initiatives aiming to achieve impact ('demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy' [UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), 2025]), knowledge exchange ('two-way exchange of knowledge, expertise, and capabilities between higher education institutions and external partners' [Knowledge Exchange UK, 2025]), public engagement (how 'the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public' [National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), 2025]) and media engagement ('communication between [academics] and the media to ensure accurate and evidence-based reporting' [Science Media Centre, 2011]). In this article, we refer to these activities collectively as 'public academia'. Expectations for this work are built into professional norms; for example many funders require applicants to prepare 'impact plans', and engagement activities can contribute towards promotion.

The unintended consequences of public academia are gaining attention in academic studies, with many focusing on the risks of backlash, abuse, misrepresentation and marginalisation (Brown & Vaughan, 2025; Cole, 2015; Galpin & Vernon, 2023; Parson, 2019; Savigny, 2019; Slater, 2024; Vera-Gray, 2017; Yelin & Clancy, 2020). As we demonstrate elsewhere, in our surveys and interviews with UK academics across disciplines and institutions, 63 out of 85 (74%) academic survey respondents had experienced harms as a result of sharing research online, while 100% of respondents lacked training in how to deal with potential backlash, and 90% said their institution did not effectively prepare them for potential risks (Yelin & Clancy, 2024). The effects of such backlash can be extreme. Academics reported harm including outright abuse including rape and death threats to academics and their families, 'stoked and coordinated' Twitter pile-ons, abusive mail and emails, phone tapping, hacking, doxxing, stalking, calls for resignation, and targeted harassment at workplaces and around academics' homes.

Our previous work explored the effects of these harms, and how they increase along intersectional axes as academics from already marginalised groups are targeted in digital cultures of racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia and ableism (Yelin & Clancy, 2024). The impact upon academics was severe: mental and physical health issues including anxiety, depression, low self-confidence, fear for personal safety,

PTSD and suicidal ideation, leading to long-term sick leave, hospitalisations, leaving jobs or moving house, breakdowns in personal relationships and impact upon children or wider families (Yelin & Clancy, 2024). These findings contradict the duty of employers to provide ‘a safe system of work’ (TUC, 2022).

This article focuses on the current academic cultures surrounding public academia in the UK. What is it about the specific context of UK universities in the 2020s, wider work economies of visibility and the importance (or not) of public academia in increasingly quantified approaches to research and engagement that foster the cultures within which such harms go unaccounted for? This article interrogates often contradictory institutional attitudes towards the value of the labour of public academia and asks how such work can be both mandatory and marginalised, and undervalued while heavily quantified. In a UK (or more broadly Global North) context, the neoliberal university, structured by market logics, has been characterised by principles of competition, casualisation (Cronin, 2016; Loveday, 2018), individualisation (Gill, 2013), metricisation, audit cultures and surveillance (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). These multiple, competing, often-conflicting demands cannot easily be reconciled with justifications around the value of universities as spaces of learning, leading to internal contradictions between universities’ discourse and practice (Turnbull, 2021). Within this marketised context, academic workers are encouraged to be autonomous and self-managing, placing them under increasing pressure to ‘perform’ but with decreasing resources and support.

Zembylas (2024, p. 173) argues that the university *being* neoliberal does not automatically *make* academics neoliberal subjects, rather ‘affective governmentality’ is at work. Tools coax us towards neoliberal subjectivities, and we must carefully assess ‘local practices and programs through which processes of neoliberalisation have manifested’ (Cannizzo, 2018a, p. 78). As such, our analysis examines data from UK academics, professional services and senior management involved in encouraging academics into the public eye. Public academia is a contextually specific concept and the neoliberal university is not a universal experience, ranging from the US as a ‘highly professionalized, hierarchical’ field, to South African public sociology resisting against an academy shaped by ‘white settler capitalism’ (Bezuidenhout et al., 2023, p. 5). The extent of critical engagement that public academia can undertake is constrained by geographically situated traditions (Bezuidenhout et al., 2023).

Firstly, we examine how these groups discuss the value of the labour of public academia as *material*, in terms of resourcing, time and money when ‘output’ is difficult to quantify. Secondly, we examine accounts where these workers discuss value as *symbolic* stratification of cultural value in the context of Higher Education and its entrenched preservation of hierarchies of knowledge production. Finally, we consider the risks of harm that arise enabled by these de/valuations as the neoliberal university shores up reputational capital while exploiting the ambiguities of invisibilised and individualised labour.

Valuing academic labour in the digital knowledge economy: Boundless, aspirational, immaterial and self-branded

The frequent misidentification of universities as ‘intellectual spaces and communities of scholars, rather than workplaces’ (Allmer, 2017, p. 600) impedes critique of labour

practices. One example of this is poor contracting practices, such as not having set working hours in employment contracts often worded in vague terms around commitment to teaching, research and administration, with indeterminate phrases such as '"other duties" as and when directed by the Head of Department' (Gill, 2013, p. 20). In other words, 'the job will never be done' (Gill, 2013, p. 21). This is what do Mar Pereira (2016) calls 'academia without walls'.

In the neoliberal university these demands are met with individualising tools of self-management that discourage collective labour politics, that is, 'technologies of the self' for (self) managing the unmanageable: 'stress management, mindfulness and resilience [. . .] "apps" designed for busy, stressed or overworked people; [. . .] proliferating "survival guides"' (Gill & Donaghue, 2016, p. 92). Cannizzo (2018a) identifies three institutional strategies coaxing academics towards neoliberal labouring: institutional invitations to academics to celebrate 'teaching innovation' as a form of enterprise, to derive a sense of self from personal investment in research, and to see their careers as entrepreneurial projects.

As UK universities become increasingly market-driven, the pressure upon academics to promote themselves online reflects wider trends of precarity and self-branding in the digital labour market (Duffy & Pooley, 2017). Self-branding is the practice of 'affective, immaterial labor that is purposefully undertaken by individuals to garner attention, reputation, and potentially, profit' (Hearn, 2010, p. 427). Sites like Academia.edu extract immaterial labour from academics while perpetuating wider academic cultures of self-monitoring (Hearn, 2010). Such practices can be considered 'fast academia', with accelerated expectations about workload and progression (O'Neill, 2014; see also Lupton et al., 2018).

Self-branding is heavily individualised, and difficult to quantify. Duffy (2017) coins the term 'aspirational labour' – the hope that *one day* digital labour will pay off. Influencers might hope for a pay cheque; academics might hope for a permanent job or a promotion. In neoliberal contexts, self-branding becomes a means to take personal responsibility for career progression (Loveday, 2018). Much of this work, like running a social media page, is initially done out of personal investment or 'passion' (Cannizzo, 2018b). This further contributes to cultures of overwork, because its unbounded nature seeps beyond the working week (Gill, 2013; do Mar Pereira, 2016).

Wider social shifts towards immaterial commodities compel new forms of labour centred around 'the manipulation of personal emotion and affect' (Hearn, 2010, p. 425). Autonomist Marxists argue that we exist in the 'social factory', where work is not only unbounded, but also the 'whole life experience of the worker is harnessed to capital' (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 17). Lazzarato (1996) observes how 'capitalism seeks to involve even the worker's personality and subjectivity within the production of value' in immaterial labour that produces information as commodity (p. 2). Intellectual, emotional, somatic and affective work is required to produce services, knowledge or communication including the cultivation of 'social networks [and] forms of community' (Hardt, 1999, p. 96). This labour, frequently subject to gendered dynamics (Fortunati, 2011), is central to many fields including academia (Winn, 2015), librarianship (Popowich, 2019), the creative and cultural industries (Gill & Pratt, 2008) and influencer culture (Abidin, 2016). In the 'knowledge economy', that is, sites of knowledge-intensive labour and their contribution to technological acceleration (Powell & Snellman, 2004), immaterial labour is mediated through technology to become a 'site of direct exploitation' (Popowich, 2019, p. 156).

Immaterial labour undertaken by academics is valuable to institutions. In contexts of heightened competition between universities enacted, for example, through press stories about research, the 'PR University' trades in 'reputational capital' (Cronin, 2016, p. 396). Public academia makes the institution externally visible, with universities counting the institution's media mentions and global 'reach'. As Hearn (2010) argues, 'a reputation is conditioned and, arguably, constituted by cultural and economic institutions that have the power to authorize [. . .] and transmute that attention back to value' (p. 423). Thus, external organisations give the university reputational value, through which they make claims about prestige. In this context, the public academia and activism academics can do is impacted in performative, metrics-driven cultures: 'institutions embrace critical research and do not raise problems about academics' activism as long as they produce' (do Mar Pereira, 2016, p. 103). The same goes for backlash: coverage driven by *negative* attention can also be quantified to demonstrate impact (as our data show).

Our data will show that from the perspective of those involved in this work, the labour is frequently amorphous and difficult to adequately quantify, or rather that quantification does not tally with the labour such work requires. Value is not only economic, but also socially constructed: that is, value can be both material and symbolic (Marx, 1844/1959). Skeggs (2014) demonstrates that value (the worth assigned to objects, things and people) and values (shared beliefs, principles and judgements) reproduce one another. Both are structured by the logic of capital 'as it tries to capture absolutely everything' (Skeggs, 2014, p. 17). Value is a deceptively 'slippery concept' that 'both describes and prescribes so that people are then both subjects and makers of values' (Skeggs, 2014, p. 3). Value is 'primarily monetized, but as with education, not always, whereas values are moral, cultural, qualitative and difficult to measure' (Skeggs, 2014, p. 3).

This article interrogates the 'relationship and production' (Skeggs, 2014, p. 4) of the under/valuing of this labour and the values that underpin such valuations. Gill (2013) calls for a labour politics which accounts for how 'power is operating through new labouring subjectivities', one which moves beyond 'individualising, toxic, self-blaming accounts of academics' (p. 25). Our article articulates this labour politics as experienced by workers in the complicated spaces of the neoliberal university: spaces governed by knowledge and information economies, reputational capitalism, platform capitalism, and the autonomous modes of work emerging through digital technologies. These exacerbate the problems with neoliberal universities highlighted by scholars, such as rampant individualism, self-branding and immaterial labour. There are many types of labour (safety, emotional) for which the economies of the neoliberal university under digital capitalism cannot (and sometimes will not) account. Our data show that it is individual academics who pay the price as institutions fall short of their legal obligation to provide workplace safety.

Methodology

This article comes from the project Cultures of Digital Hate, which seeks structural change in support offered to those dealing with digital hate. The project began as autoethnographic, reflecting on our experiences of receiving digital hate after our research on the monarchy's co-option of Meghan Markle's feminism was published in *The Sunday Times* (Clancy & Yelin, 2018). We have since undertaken qualitative research with

academics and those involved in supporting academics to share their research publicly. First, we collected 85 survey responses and undertook 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews with UK academics across disciplines and institutions. We then gathered 59 survey responses and 13 interviews with UK university professional services and senior management staff involved in encouraging academics into the public eye. Job titles included Press, Social Media, Public Engagement, Industrial Liaison and Impact Officers at various levels of seniority, Pro-VC Research, and Research Directors. Henceforth, we refer to these roles collectively as 'Research Engagement Facilitators'. We also conducted a series of public discussions with 17 speakers from law, tech, data science, activism, charities, think tanks, academic 'impact' workers, and across academic disciplines.

Through this mixed methodology, we sought to ascertain both the breadth of experiences (how widespread the issues are) and the depth of experiences (impact upon their lives). Surveys were distributed via Qualtrics. The survey for academics included questions about undertaking public academia, positive and negative experiences, and support available from their institutions. The survey with Research Engagement Facilitators included questions on their awareness of the risks of visibility, their institution's protocols for digital hate, and if they had the training and resources and understanding of digital hate to feel able to offer support. Questions included tick box responses and free-text boxes for participants to share experiences.

The issues of the undervaluing of academic labour discussed in this article are implicated in our methods as recruitment depended on participants volunteering labour. The labour of research participants is integral to producing academic research, but rarely acknowledged. Where projects have funding for financial reimbursement for participants' time, participation in academic research has been reimagined as a form of gig-based income with labour solicited on digital labour platforms, raising ethical concerns about the 'material conditions of the circulation of capital through academia and the role of research participants in this mode of production' (McKenzie, 2024, p. 241). While universities benefit from the circulation of capital in the production of research through REF processes, paying participants for labour can constitute a feminist ethics of care (Warnock et al., 2022). We were unable to offer financial compensation, but seek to make visible participants' labour both in this research and their wider roles.

Surveys were disseminated via mailing lists and social media. Responses were anonymous; however, participants could leave their details to partake in follow-up interviews. We sourced further interviewees via mailing lists and social media. Interviews lasted around 60 minutes and followed a loose discussion guide based upon the survey questions but allowing participants flexibility to shape the conversation towards what felt significant to them. Interviews were transcribed, and thematically coded using NVivo. While our sample is not extensive enough to quantify the scale of this problem across all UK institutions, it does demonstrate the severity of the impact on those affected, as well as everyday experiences of working in institutional settings.

We must acknowledge our position within these debates. It is impossible to be neutral when researching harms that have affected you (Yelin & Clancy, 2020). Our approach to this research is therefore always already situated (Haraway, 1988). However, acknowledging our experiences, which we shared with participants where relevant, fostered

feelings of safety around sharing, and allowed us to take a trauma-informed approach to the wellbeing of participants (Alessi & Kahn, 2022).

Time, money and material value: 'I don't get paid for this additional work!'

Despite increasing emphasis upon and expectations of public academia, many academics reported that media work in particular was undervalued by their institutions, managers and colleagues: 'universities don't value this sort of work at all'. Value corresponds to the extent to which this work is taken seriously *as work* by employers and, as our data will demonstrate, a culture which undervalues the labour of public academia escapes the notice of principles such as work-based safety. A speaker at our public event articulated this contradiction in the de/valuing of public academia: 'a lot of this work is done unpaid, even though institutions may be encouraging academics to engage in public discussion [. . .] that happens in people's own time'. This sentiment was echoed by academic respondents: 'I don't get paid for this additional work!' Another explained that the lack of value was because public communication of research 'can't easily be given a monetary value/quantified in line with how [management] want everything quantified now'. The undervaluing is frequently literal in terms of financial investment for people's time, and many academic respondents raised issues concerning time: the time spent doing this work being unaccounted for, the time wasted dealing with abuse, and the impact of this on the time available to undertake their wider responsibilities. One respondent lamented that they 'don't have time within the working day to do it, so [it] eats into spare time'.

Part of the problem is that public academia is 'not a recognised element of our work hours [or] our Work Allocation Models, so it's something you have to do additionally. And to be good at it, it does take time. It is a skill!' Public academia takes considerable labour to practise and undertake, and yet is 'tagged on' to already full workloads: 'the crux here is that public engagement work is seen as additional, and therefore easy to dismiss'; it is difficult finding 'time for activities that are not formally work loaded'. Often, it is vaguely attached to the 'research' portion of academic workloads; however 'research' is its own, time-hungry task. Spending research time doing public academia means time away from preparing publications and grants, which are no less expected. Where time is formally given, this is often inadequate for the demands of engagement. One academic participant who was responsible for an ESRC Impact Accelerator Grant had been allocated 'about an hour and a half a week [. . .] and I have been just incredulous, because I'm basically setting up a business'. Establishing a public profile is time-consuming work involving considerable expertise in public relations, marketing, image management and so on. Each of these is a standalone professional role, yet academics must embody these for free, in addition to a full-time job: a clear example of do Mar Pereira's (2016) 'academia without walls'.

Issues around time are exacerbated by the unpredictable work pattern of media engagement. One academic participant observed: 'when I engage with the radio, I am often approached last minute, and sometimes [have to] prepare for a next day interview that takes place early in the morning'. Others reflected on the behind-the-scenes labour

of media engagement, such as informal 'chats' with journalists before they pursue a credited media appearance. Often, these 'chats' lead to nothing tangible. For one academic respondent, the persistent expectation of unrecognised labour felt like an attack on their personhood:

> . . . there is an assumption that my time is other people's and that I will work for free, which of course I do, I mean, I do loads of pro bono work, [. . .] I also don't subscribe to the, 'oh people must be paid for their time at all times', because that can be quite instrumental and quite neoliberal, can't it? I think it's more a question of respecting people's time and respecting people's personhood as well.

This participant's call for 'respecting people's time and personhood' referred to both within and outside of academia, where the creeping expectations for unpaid labour take various guises and are compounded by one another. This was exacerbated for those participants spending *even more* time responding to negative attention. One academic respondent saw time and risk of exposure as the twin costs of public academia: 'Maintaining a public presence is [. . .] too time consuming and exposing.' Another felt at breaking point from carefully strategising to avoid negative attention: 'I can't keep going like this, like, you don't realise how much time has been put into [ensuring] stuff like this [is] not happening.' Another noted that when negative attention did occur, the need to respond entailed further labour: 'that person then needs to spend time perhaps defending themselves, which derails their original message'.

Inextricable from issues of pay and time is the question of resource allocation. The pinch on the valuing of public academia was felt both in the experiences of academic staff and amongst Research Engagement Facilitators, who similarly felt that their labour was overlooked and erased. One Research Engagement Facilitator survey respondent explained:

> I dont think this is high on universities lists to fund. Its become one of thise activities that people dont argue about but dont pay foir. Its a given that its 'done' but no one dares to delve into whether it could be done better. Too ma[n]y warm words and not enough cold cash! [*sic*]

This participant describes how public academia is rhetorically celebrated but materially unsupported despite public academia itself having changed almost beyond recognition in the digital knowledge economy. As this respondent explains, if the work is being done and the university can take credit for it, the *how* and the *by whom* of this labour are treated as details of little consequence. Research Engagement Facilitators spoke of cuts to this support work, reflecting broader redundancy programmes across UK academia. One observed, 'we used to have a public engagement team and we no longer do', with this work being absorbed into already existing teams (and their already full workloads). Many lamented the challenges of getting senior management support: '[it] is hard to develop without a top down, sort of, university focus'. Without the leadership and resourcing commitment from senior management, it was difficult for these teams to do anything except deal with the 'everyday'. Strategic reorganisation of services was impossible.

The experiences of these staff show that dismissive attitudes are imbricated with the perpetuation of perceived hierarchies that reify certain types of labour over all others. Time and value are interlinked literally in terms of labour costs, but also in how unaccounted for labour is rendered invisible. We argue that it is this failure to recognise the labour that goes into public academia, as valid – and therefore *as labour* – that lets employers off the hook in terms of their duty of care. How can any harms experienced as a result of public academia work be accounted for in workplace policy if they are not seen to have occurred at work? Indeed, how can something be recognised as an issue of work-based safety if it is not recognised as work in the first place?

Hierarchies, prestige and symbolic value: 'I worry that I may be too "promiscuous" with my public engagement'

In the hierarchised context of academic 'outputs', prestige is a form of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) which can reciprocally become a source of economic capital:

> Exchange value is generated from the symbolic value of both the practice/object and by the relations by which they are attached (e.g., entitlement, exploitation and appropriation). (Skeggs, 2004, p. 79)

Our data show that the undervaluing of public academia is not only material in terms of allocation of resources of money and time. Rather, material circumstances stem from granting or withholding symbolic value – the meaning, significance or cultural status afforded to academics and their work beyond their practical or economic exchange value.

Despite pressure to undertake significant labour to disseminate research findings, many universities fail to value public academia as much as research publications for academic audiences. One academic respondent tied this to their institution's status in a hierarchy between universities: 'My institution (elite, ancient and Russell Group) simply does not value this work in the same way.' Academia is riven with hierarchies of value, many of which are entrenched and formalised through things like league tables: between institutions, between workers, between disciplines and between the outputs that academics spend their time on. One academic expressed a contradiction between the low perceived value of public academia and its high time cost, believing that time spent on dissemination had cost them opportunities perceived as higher status: 'To be honest it would be easier not to do this work [. . .] I would probably have got some of the jobs I applied for, because I would have had more time to do high, like, status outputs.' This concern about public academia work being considered lower status than other forms of academic labour was echoed by an academic who expressed concern that around their public work 'there's very little prestige'. These negative attitudes towards public academia often come from peers: 'academics mostly looking down [their] nose, and saying I'm not serious/should be in a thinktank rather than academic dept'. The idea that public academia is an additional extra, not considered part of the 'real' academic workload, despite the time it takes those who perform it, was expressed by one participant thus: 'when the demands are high, I do often feel conflicted, because I often tend to put this kind of work above the more "bread and butter" parts of my work'. An academic survey

respondent echoed these misconceptions that public academia is not ‘real’ work in response to the question ‘do you ever experience any challenges in maintaining your public profile?’:

> It is time consuming, and not recognised/credited ([e.g.] ‘great that you do that impact stuff, but it isn’t a substitute for academic work’ i.e. [it] should be done in your spare time), negative comments by some colleagues ([e.g.] ‘not a real scholar’, ‘not doing serious work’, ‘wasting time’).

In all of these cases, the lack of value attached to public academia is associated with persistent, outdated stereotypes about popular culture being ‘low brow’ and vacuous entertainment (Williams, 1976). The ephemeral nature of public engagement is contrasted with the legitimising weight (often literally) of a published monograph as a more celebrated and permanent conduit of knowledge sharing. Public academia is dismissed as a trivial, lightweight and illegitimate site of knowledge production lacking the academic principles of intellectual rigour – a positioning which tarnishes those conducting this work. The characterisation of academia as the reified ‘life of the mind’ is an exclusionary construct into which only those who embody traditional academic value(s) are permitted (Yelin & Clancy, 2024). This policing of hierarchies of value translates into the devaluing of particular skillsets; for example, one Research Engagement Facilitator spoke of a history of hostility towards

> . . . those colleagues who had the temerity to be able to communicate well and be on the TV all the time. I remember having to defend quite a lot of my academics who were good communicators from the guys that were accusing them of dumbing down, or being, you know, utterly idiotic and generally, sort of like, bad eggs.

Assumptions around what constitutes ‘good’ academic writing adhere to a particular set of cultural norms, rather than valuing communication that prioritises, for example, accessibility and clarity – qualities which are denied worth in academic hierarchies of cultural value.

Even seemingly positive references to visibility and fame operated as veiled critiques of failure to adhere to the habitus and hierarchies of cultural field and register that underpin academic currencies (Bourdieu, 1984). One female academic related how her colleague was told,

> . . . that they’re the ‘academic Beyonce’ because they have so many Twitter followers as a consequence of their public facing work. And this throwaway observation is probably meant with fondness in that particular context, but nonetheless suggests a lower cultural register than that which academic work is supposed to operate in.

The academic here experienced the comments as shaming, tied to notions of fame being a form of narcissistic attention seeking which seeks to capitalise on illegitimate sources of value (Yelin, 2020). Another female academic said: ‘there can be implications that public engagement cheapens research, that it’s for the masses and therefore not properly academic, that it’s more about gaining popularity or celebrity than doing good work’.

'Good work' seems to imply that only traditional, inaccessible forms of knowledge production like writing expensive monographs or paywalled journal articles are seen to 'count' as legitimate. In comparison, dissemination 'for the masses' is dismissed as lacking intellectual value, perceived instead as attention-seeking behaviour aligned with a celebrity culture that is devalued within academic hierarchies of cultural worth.

This concern was echoed by one female Research Engagement Facilitator who observed that, except in the cases of unusually high-status public academia, this work tends to be done by women, and articulated the characterisation of this labour thus: 'public engagement is seen as the fluffy thing to do, isn't it? It's all lovely and fluffy and, "oh, you'll go and deliver something [. . .] and it will all be wonderful".'. Scholars have theorised PR workers as being perceived as 'fluffy' and therefore feminised, with their value to institutional operations systematically overlooked (Topić, 2021). Such sentiments are echoed by a Research Engagement Facilitator who described the way their work is diminished, thus:

> . . . others might think of. . . the communications is almost like you're rolling out the glitter. . . on top of the press release, which I would say is not the case, but obviously it's in my self-interest to say that.

Glitter is semiotically load-bearing, having been theorised as 'frivolous and even dangerous [. . .] seen as feminine, childish, queer' (Coleman, 2020, p. 5) and as 'insistently apolitical' (McRobbie, 1994, p. 175). This is seen as 'unserious' work, and therefore unimportant compared to the solemnity of more traditional knowledge production. Such language gatekeeps the boundaries of what 'proper' academic work is or is not.

One female academic respondent reported receiving 'a lot of sneering and sexism from academics, and one of my bosses wanted to fire me over doing media work as they considered it frivolous'. This academic understood the frivolous characterisation to be a product of sexism, and this was echoed across our research. Coate and Howson (2014) argue that in a 'prestige economy [. . .] the factors of prestige accrued over the course of an academic career are more easily acquired by men and are more likely to be associated with male academics' (p. 569). In line with the gendered scrutiny of women in the public eye more broadly (Holmes & Negra, 2011; Paule & Yelin, 2024; Yelin, 2020), female academics are more likely to be seen as devaluing the ivory towers of academia by engaging with popular culture.

Our academic respondents used gendered language that infers a particular form of attention seeking tied to sexualisation and sex. For example, although they did not specify who they thought might hold the sentiment, one female academic said 'I worry that I may be too "promiscuous" with my public engagement activities and that this will mean I am taken less seriously.' The fear that public academia could be interpreted as 'too promiscuous' suggests disciplinary undercurrents which police and punish those who actively seek attention, and are thus seen as 'asking for trouble'. This victim blaming logic is reminiscent of the 'slut' as a regulatory ideal to tell women who suffer sexual violence that they are 'asking for it' (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). The 'attention whore' does not deserve to be taken seriously. The characterisation of doing too much and trying too hard as 'promiscuous' evokes notions of respectability in female visibility (Skeggs,

1997). As Yelin (2020) argues, this is a common theme of punitively gendered celebrity culture; what provokes censure 'is the deliberate willingness it suggests to be looked at. Or even, a willingness to be seen to make an effort to encourage others to look. [. . .] The supposedly unseemly difference [. . .] is the invitation to an admiring audience which one ought to be able to attract with ease' (pp. 144–145).

This criticism is inflected by the hierarchised gendering of different fields of academic research: 'if you're doing something like sexual violence or reproductive justice work, it's seen as women's work. . . If you're some kind of bigwig bloke working on high level policy with the White House, then maybe that's different, maybe that is seen as work.' This mirrors wider concerns about the valuation of disciplines, for example Media Studies derogatively referred to as 'Mickey Mouse degrees' (Bennett & Kidd, 2016). The gendered hierarchies the aforementioned respondent highlights reproduce labour economies where only some work is considered as work (Coate & Howson, 2014), whilst other forms are seen as passion projects outside of institutional concerns and therefore outside of workplace health and safety remits. Her account suggests that some types of research are more valued, and therefore institutionally protected, than others, and as we have demonstrated, these categorisations are heavily gendered (and classed and racialised).

Devolved risk, personal responsibility and reputational capitalism: 'There is a culture of, "you're on your own"'

As Yelin (2020) argues, professional online visibility is beset with 'precarity and the risks of exposure without insulation' (p. 10). The expectation that public academia will fit around already full workloads transfers risk from institution to individual, circumscribing institutional health and safety responsibilities. Ambiguity around whether these activities are formally recognised as academic work leaves researchers exposed when institutions retrospectively decide that this was not the preferred use of an academic's time. One academic participant said, 'It feels like another job and an extension of academia that has appeared during my career that makes me very uncomfortable.' Participants articulate a sense of disquiet around the encroachment of entrepreneurial logics into academic labour, with the unsupported expansion of academic duties experienced as burdensome. Another situated their experience within broader, post-Fordist political economies of neoliberal labour:

> I also don't want to be an entrepreneur, particularly an unpaid entrepreneur. [. . .] You are creating all these spin-off little businesses and strategies: my media thing, my publishing, my teaching, my this, my that. Some things give me ratings and some things don't, and then you have this situation where you're like – like the Tories want – you are taking on all the risk.

Resisting being an 'unpaid entrepreneur' encapsulates the contradictions of marketised academic labour, while the reference to the Tories underscores the ideological framing of the shift: a withdrawal of institutional responsibility, replaced by precarious self-management (Gill & Doanaghue, 2016).

Many academic respondents said that their university prioritised reputation management over staff care. Indeed, before submitting funding bids, some universities require academics to submit a reputational risk assessment; for example the authors have observed a form with the question: 'Are there any aspects of the project, including the subject of research, the funding source, or the third parties involved which could result in reputational damage to the university?' One academic said that staff at their university 'avoid scandals like the plague, so any form of scandal – even as insignificant as a toxic tweet – can cost dearly'. This was a sentiment echoed by Research Engagement Facilitators, one of whom explained that 'university communications, I think, is [*sic*] still predominantly wrapped around marketing, recruitment and brand', with all externally facing activity linked to student recruitment and attracting funding, meaning that communications teams 'tend to be quite risk averse'. Another Research Engagement Facilitator noted their institution's narrow appetite in terms of the types of public discourse to which they were willing to contribute:

> They don't want bad press. It's not a written thing. It is just a verbal – not even verbal – it's just a known thing, that certain things they will handle with kid gloves. They want really nice, fluffy, good interest pieces [. . .] and we don't want bad things to be reflected on us as an institution, because that reduces recruitment, etc., etc. We are a business.

The 'nice, fluffy' characterisation, again, highlights the imperative towards the 'insistently apolitical' (McRobbie, 1994, p. 175). That this is 'not even verbal – it's just a known thing' reflects the prevalence of unwritten norms in academia, here a tacit regulation of communicative labour, again fostering and benefitting from ambiguity which blames individual academics who contravene the unspoken rules around which stories will be celebrated. As universities function increasingly like corporate entities, institutional imperatives protect brands rather than employee health and safety, and this raises concerns about consequences when the 'bad things' *do* happen in a culture where avoidance of reputational harm supersedes complexity or critical enquiry. This is a departure from the public mission of the university, made explicitly in the Research Engagement Facilitator's statement 'we are a business'.

As another Research Engagement Facilitator said, 'there is a culture of "you're on your own" and therefore it is at your peril should anything happen.' An academic echoed this assessment, making explicit the dereliction of health and safety duty of care as they experienced 'institutional betrayal' from an employer who 'threw [them] to the dogs in the press' to protect the university. In some cases, this led to direct risk to people's employment status:

> If you do something out of line, they will hold you, I think. I think potentially people think [. . .] it's safe, but actually I'm hearing from more and more places where, you know, like if, say, the media has an issue with someone's work, [institutional retribution] is another risk.

Thus, risk aversion in institutions prioritising their reputational capital has significant repercussions for academics whose research intersects with contentious or politicised topics and who are branded 'troublemakers' damaging the university's PR or making it harder to attract students and funding.

Some academics expressed concern about this given their research areas. In a context of expanding right-wing political power, 'the culture wars', populism and threats of misinformation, some topics inherently attract more media and public attention than others. While these researchers were employed by their university *to do* this research, they said they felt abandoned when dealing with the consequences. One academic said that they were 'afraid that lies could spread [under] my name in a political moment when science, scientists and educators were being challenged under an ultra-right wing political scenario'. As an individual, they felt powerless to address accusations when they were being spread by global media conglomerates. Similarly, an academic in elite studies noted their concern about 'a growing tendency for individuals [. . .] with lots of money to sue individual researchers'. As Rivera (2023) has shown, this intimidation tactic is frequent globally as a way for elites to maintain their dominance, actively closing down free speech to protect their own power. Individual academics have little hope of standing against these elites alone – many wield vast wealth and influence. As (networks of) institutions, universities *could* offer some collective support against external threats.

In contrast, being 'thrown to the dogs' with little institutional support left academic participants in a very real situation of risk, to themselves and to their careers. One academic said: 'This is really disturbing, because if a university doesn't then support that individual and throws them under a bus that could both ruin their career and lead to a breakdown, or worse.' This is borne out in our data, cited in the introduction to this article, on the impact of online backlash to academics sharing their research publicly:

> . . . hospitalisations, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, PTSD and other mental and physical health issues leading to long term sick leave, having to leave their job, move city, breakdowns in personal relationships, lack of self-confidence, fear for personal safety, and impact upon their children or wider families. As one respondent said: 'I have been traumatised and re-traumatised'. (Yelin & Clancy, 2024, p. 196)

Our data show that this does not just affect academics who have been directly impacted by digital hate, but that it encourages self-policing from others, who watch what happens to colleagues with trepidation. Of course, this unequally affects those who have identities or who study topics that are more at risk. One academic spoke of a 'consensus bill [. . .] in the academic community', where 'some people [are] on the extreme end' and then 'there are reactions to them, and ripples in the academic community. I think that almost acts as a kind of discipline for the rest of us.' These 'ripples' have a disciplinary function, acting as *technologies of the self* that coax self-surveillance and self-management so as not to disrupt the neoliberal order (Cannizzo, 2018a; Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Zembylas, 2024). By watching what happens to others, people censor or silence themselves to avoid the same fate. This means that cultures of hate, and lack of institutional protections, do not have to directly impact everybody, rather through institutional techniques they can be cascaded down as a result of the devolution of risk to academics and the feeling of personal responsibility that this provokes.

Other respondents reflected how this disciplining effect enacts harm on careers: 'a lot of the funding is aimed at creating social impact, so there is no other way to obtain it nowadays. So, [if you avoided engagement, you] would probably have to change careers.'

This is notable because it speaks to the double meaning of 'disciplining', where – as we have argued throughout this piece – public academia is both mandatory and marginalised. You are damned if you do and damned if you don't. This means that, for many academics, if they do the public academia work they are at risk of being left alone to deal with the consequences, characterised as doing 'fluffy', lesser work, or forced to do it in their own time. However, if they do not do it, their career prospects are at risk.

Of course, ironically, all of this does not mean that the university does not still benefit from the increased exposure that comes with being featured in media culture, particularly if it is international coverage. Universities often have technology that tracks global mentions of its name, and many quantify this with data about the circulation figures of each media outlet. This information sometimes gets summarised in emails sent to senior management, to demonstrate the amount of publicity the university has had over a particular period. Some of these trackers do not account for the tenor of the coverage, just that it happened. Similarly, a lack of care for individual researchers does not stop institutions capitalising on incidents in, for example, impact case studies and in the case of one respondent whose former institution 'submitted an impact case study based on the [backlash] and are going to be profiting from that'. In a context where staff so totally operate under the neoliberal imperative that they state, 'we are a business', public academia will be capitalised upon for the benefit of the university in both financial and reputational capital. This is regardless of the personal cost to those undertaking the labour, and regardless of the circumscribing of institutional health and safety responsibilities.

Conclusion

In a sociopolitical context where peer-reviewed academic research can serve as a valuable corrective to misinformation, public academia takes on a particular urgency (Yelin & Clancy, 2024). Sharing knowledge beyond the academy allows 'communities to contribute to, and benefit from, knowledge, teaching and research' (NCCPE, 2025). It is also worth noting that public academia can take on many different forms beyond our focus on the digital, and these induce various issues, for instance when we engage with stakeholders who must be sheltered from critique, or when university–community partnerships take on an exploitative nature. The various permutations of public academia are worthy of future research.

In contemporary academia, the vestiges of the 'old university' (white men in tweed jackets writing lots of books) remain in the hierarchies of academic cultural and symbolic value that denigrate certain types of labour and output. At the same time, the 'new university' (global, metricised neoliberal businesses) protects reputation and retracts institutional support, leaving an exploitative culture of 'you're on your own'. The labour of sharing research publicly sits between these two poles, receiving disapproval and an exacerbation of harm from both sides. Our data expose the tensions created by the persistent undervaluing of the labour of public academia: in terms of the material accounting for the resources required, in terms of academic hierarchies of symbolic value, and in terms of the contradiction between the public mission of the university as a space for ideas and the penchant for risk aversion born of reputational capitalism that protects economic interests over employee wellbeing.

Despite the individualisation of the neoliberal university, which demands that academics pursue projects of self-promotion, our data have shown that academic respondents reported that when they met those demands they were judged harshly, under-resourced and put in harm's way without institutional support. Academia has a contradictory attitude to the labour of public academia, where it is both mandatory but also frowned upon, leaving employees in a double bind where they lose either way. One academic respondent summarised this neatly in their distinction between this work and 'serious' intellectualism. They expressed concern that colleagues assume that public-facing work is all just part of being a good neoliberal entrepreneur or academic capitalist. That it is motivated by cultivating a personal brand, rather than intellectual commitment, and is about individualistically furthering one's own career.

Such individualism is here both a requirement of the institution and a threat to the academic respondent's intellectual standing. This speaks to the role of the academic in the contemporary university landscape that increasingly quantifies knowledge production. 'Ideas' are 'valued' less than measurable, objectifiable, quantifiable outputs, and a desire to communicate with audiences outside of the university is simultaneously seen as anti-intellectual *and* pro-neoliberalisation – despite receiving no protection under neoliberalisation. Academics are required to compete in systems of value production based upon visibility, productivity and reputation, but this visibility renders them suspect within institutional cultures that equate public academia with intellectual promiscuity. University workers are doing the mandatory work, but are punished for seeking attention and being 'too promiscuous'. A desire to communicate with audiences outside the university is cast as anti-intellectual and an unseemly willingness to participate in the neoliberal marketplace of attention. This creates the conditions for victim blaming logic when digital cultures we know to be beset by racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, fatphobia, transphobia and xenophobia attack academics for their ideas and identities (Yelin & Clancy, 2024). It also works to absolve institutions of their responsibilities and enables them to abandon their duty of care to workers experiencing harm in the workplace. The personalisation of responsibility has a disciplinary effect, coaxing self-management and maintaining the neoliberal order.

The very model of today's universities thus lends itself to a lack of responsibility for staff wellbeing, where, as we have shown, the economics, the organisational structures, the attribution of value and the preoccupation with quantification directly oppose employer duty of care enshrined in law. The institution extracts value from public-facing labour while depriving workers of protections associated with recognised forms of work. Until public-facing work is taken seriously *as work*, universities will not be held accountable for the harms arising from it.

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