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SUCCESS AS ANTITHETICAL TO SAFETY: RESEARCHING THE FAR RIGHT IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

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Success metrics in academia, both of institutions and individual researchers, have increasingly moved towards emphasising impact, production, and efficiency. Prioritising public scholarship, publications, and digital presence, academics increasingly understand the need to build a profile to have an edge in an incredibly competitive job market (Veletsianos et al, 2018). However, these necessities exist within an increasingly hostile environment, with widespread discrimination, threat, and hostility present on the same forums academics engage in. Visibility is tied to both success and risk: the more visible a researcher is, the more likely they are to face harassment. The available risk mitigations create a troubling choice for the researcher, often involving strategies that reduce visibility, and thus impact on success. Veletianos et al (2018) and Massanari (2018) have argued that greater attention needs to be paid to the balance between visibility and safety because of the close connection with success and opportunity.

This paper seeks to examine and problematise the balance scholars must strike between being safe and being successful. It focuses on the uneven impact of threats and how available mitigation measures risk exacerbating and maintaining structural barriers. Whilst attention is increasingly being paid to the issue of researcher welfare and safety, it tends to be either focused solely on individual practices or institutional structures. This paper critiques the broader environment researchers of the far right operate in, particularly focusing on the impact of digital presence and success metrics on researcher safety and wellbeing.

Success in academia

The phenomena 'publish or perish' (POP) is emblematic of this increasing focus on production and efficiency. Moosa (2018) notes how POP has been a feature of academia, with De Rond and Millier (2005, in Moosa 2018) stating that "[t]here are few more familiar aphorisms in the academic community than "publish or perish", which is venerated by many and dreaded by more'. Central to POP is the requirement to produce as many publications and contributions as possible, with the perception that

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this production is tied to visibility and thus grants. Exacerbating this is the connection between demonstrating impact and receiving grant funding, again placing emphasis on the researcher to engage in public scholarship, branding, and visibility. Academics engage in phenomena such as #AcademicTwitter because of its benefits of engagement, increased impact, and the opportunities for networking (Walker 2016). Through this, the individual academic is developed into a “microcelebrity”, with public scholarship and a digital presence being actively “desirable” in a candidate (Massanari, 2018; Veletsianos et al 2018). These metrics exist within an increasingly competitive job market, with Warren (2019) finding that new assistant professors published twice as many articles as a new assistant professor in 1990s.

The hostile environment

Simultaneously, academics are increasingly being understood as a ‘vulnerable population’, subject to harms from both the material and the environment. Networked harassment, vicarious trauma, and unwanted attention from hostile groups has been a known threat since #OperationDiggingDiGRA in 2014 when gaming academics were targeted by the alt-right for their feminist positioning (Massanari, 2018). Hostility towards academics in a range of disciplines have been documented, with abuse so common it’s considered “an everyday part of the internet” (Marwick and Caplan, 2018, p.545). Those on the sharp end of far right discourse are particularly vulnerable to unwanted attention and abuse (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). As such, being actively engaged in digital and public scholarship produces a number of risks that must be considered.

Secondly, scholars are vulnerable to harm from the material itself, known in the literature as secondary or vicarious trauma (Williamson et al 2020). Reported among content creators, archivists, trauma researchers, and those researching extremism, vicarious trauma is “‘emotional residue of exposure’ ... it results from people witnessing trauma (by direct exposure or by hearing narratives about it), and thus becoming ‘witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured’” (American Counselling Association in Williamson et al, 2020; van der Merwe and Hunt 2019; Williamson et al 2020; Winter, 2019).

These risks disproportionately affect those at the sharp end of the far right.

Methodology

This paper situates lived experience within the broader environment of neoliberal academia to examine how we practice scholarship and success in relation to risk and safety. The paper utilises a thematic analysis approach with a corpus of 21 interviews with researchers of the far right and manosphere from the US, UK, Europe, and Australia. In particular, this paper seeks to problematise structural elements that render emotional and physical protection inaccessible to most by creating barriers and a need to trade safety for success.

In the next section, I briefly consider the key finding: that safety is antithetical to success.

Mitigations

Respondents detailed how available protection measures to deal with the aforementioned risks were experienced as incompatible with what they understand as necessary for progression and success: visibility and publication. Those working at the intersections of marginalisation and precarity report making choices that may harm their career in order to safeguard themselves, in particular whether or not to engage with digital and public scholarship. Other respondents reported fearing the greatest risk around points of success in academia, particularly publishing. The paper finds that broader issues in both academia and the online environment are magnified at this intersection, rendering researchers vulnerable and structurally unsupported. Suggestions to “just get off the internet”, publish less, or in different venues was contradictory with how success is measured and enabled through engagement with digital scholarship and publication. Those who took steps were highly conscious of the potential impact it may have on their careers but felt it necessary for safety. Both Veletsianos et al (2018) and Massanari (2018) problematise available mitigations for enabling a select few to engage in incredibly valuable and desirable venues.

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