

'Amplifier' platforms and impact

Australian scholars' use of *The Conversation*

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Digital and social media have grown exponentially to become highly influential spheres of public communication – increasingly crowded, contested, and corrupted, and increasingly in need of scholarly engagement. Alternative metrics ('altmetrics') that are generated from social and digital media platforms have become more important as indicators of impact and engagement for scholars. In *AUR* 61/2, we reviewed the growth of amplifier platforms and the academic and contextual reasons for their growth. In this article, we investigate how scholars frame their practices of engagement and impact, how they use 'amplifier platforms', in particular *The Conversation*, and to what extent institutions are supporting their staff in these activities. We find that scholars frame engagement and impact as an ethical imperative and place importance on evidence-based messaging; that they are not only interested in seeing their own research amplified, but in amplifying other quality research; that this benefits their other academic activities; that open access models promote republication and increase reach and engagement; and that institutional support for engaging on amplifier platforms is uneven and underdeveloped.

Keywords: public scholarship, amplifier platforms, digital media, online scholarly communication, The Conversation, engagement and impact

Introduction

Amplifier platforms are used by scholars to engage with wider publics and stakeholders than academia alone. The most prominent amplifier platform in Australia is *The Conversation*, a digital media platform that publishes articles written by academics and is aimed at a general readership. *The Conversation* is an open platform that facilitates the republication of its articles and is an effective channel for scholars to communicate their research to diverse audiences.

This article is the second in a two-part investigation. Our article in *Australian Universities' Review* 61/2 (Osman & Cunningham, 2019) focused on the academic and contextual reasons for the growth of amplifier platforms. This article draws on qualitative findings based on data collected through surveys and interviews with scholars across career stages, disciplines and institutions. We find that scholars frame engagement and impact as an ethical imperative and place importance on evidence-based messaging; that they are not

only interested in seeing their own research amplified, but in amplifying other quality research; that this benefits their other academic activities; that open access models promote republication and increase reach and engagement; and that institutional support for engaging on amplifier platforms is uneven and underdeveloped.

Methods

First, we collected data through a series of questions added to *The Conversation's* annual survey of their readers and authors (who are also readers). Our questions targeted authors and focused on motivations for publishing in *The Conversation*, whether it was useful in their careers, and the extent to which their institutions were supportive of such publishing activities.

The survey was delivered to all readers and authors who visited the site during a two-week period in July 2017, and had 6,084 respondents. Of these, 196 respondents were

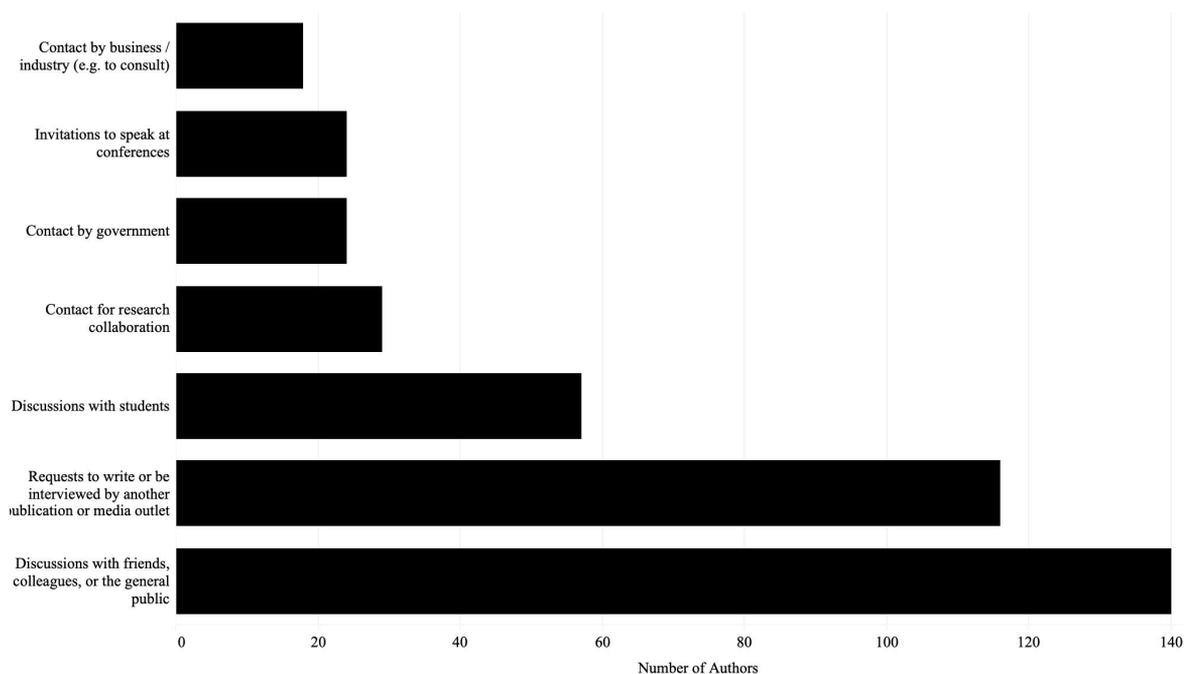


Figure 1: Outcomes of writing for *The Conversation*

authors published by *The Conversation* who answered our questions and exactly half agreed to be interviewed by us. Of the 196 authors who answered our questions, most (78 per cent) rated publishing in *The Conversation* at least somewhat useful to their career, while 73 per cent indicated some level of institutional encouragement for such activities (keeping in mind encouragement does not necessarily equal support). Survey respondents noted a range of reactions to publishing in *The Conversation* as indicated in Figure 1, along with invitations to submit book proposals, contact from community groups and unsolicited contact from trade lobby groups.

After analysing survey responses, we collected data from *The Conversation's* metrics about all 98 authors who agreed to be interviewed including the number of articles they had each published (Figure 2), the number of cumulative reads (Figure 3) and re-publications (Figure 4) they had on *The Conversation* site, how many times their articles were shared on social media, their field of study and career stage.

Using these data we narrowed the field to 16 authors who were contacted for an interview based on either high numbers of reads (how many times people accessed their article on *The Conversation* or associated websites), republications (how many different media outlets the article was republished in), or social media shares (on sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn) of their articles. It was a purposive sample as we explored how contributing to amplifier platforms like *The Conversation* played out subject to a number of variables such as career stage, gender and age.

Nine scholars were interviewed in the pilot round. The group included five women and four men who were from sciences (five participants), education (two), writing and management. Our interviewees were a range of everyday academics, from part-time early career lecturers to senior scholars with public profiles. All had had some degree of success writing for *The Conversation*, based on available metrics such as those shown in Figures 3 and 4. That is, their articles had a high readership – in some cases millions of readers – on *The Conversation* and other sites (*The Conversation* publishes content under a Creative Commons license and its articles are regularly republished on other sites, and readership is also tracked on these sites by *The Conversation*), they were widely republished in other prominent outlets such as the ABC or CNN and/or their articles had a high number of shares on social media sites such as Facebook.

It is important to note that the metrics that are currently underpinning our understanding of the interview data do not distinguish between academic and non-academic impact. However, from survey responses indicating contact from a variety of stakeholders, we can assume the available metrics do demonstrate a significant degree of public engagement. Underpinning this assumption is *The Conversation's* self-reporting that 82 per cent of its readership is non-academic (*The Conversation*, 2018).

The interviews focused on scholars' public communication activities as distinct from traditional academic publishing. We wanted to know how scholars understood engagement and impact, and what drove them to engage with the

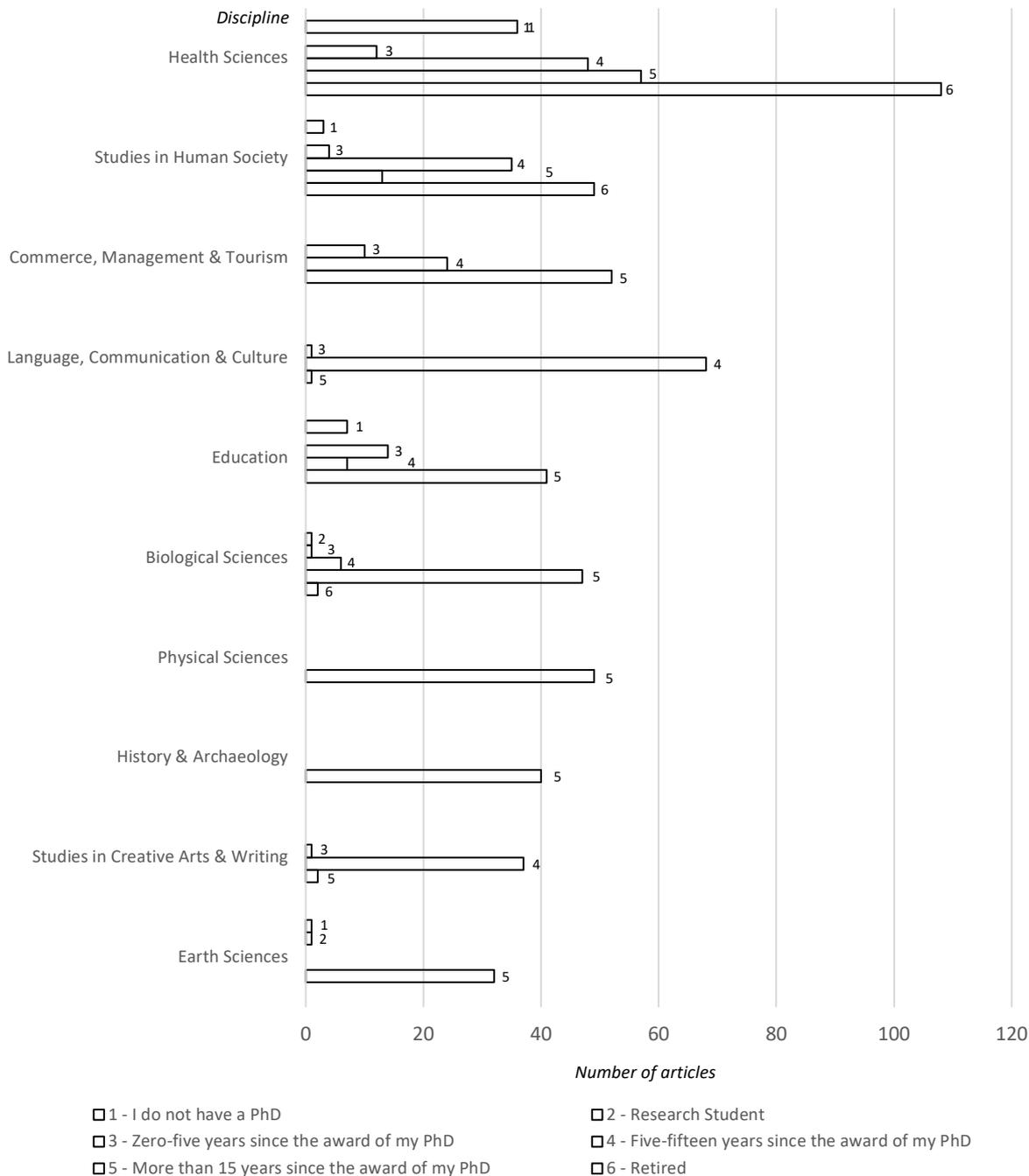


Figure 2: Number of articles written by authors of *The Conversation* who responded to our survey questions (n=98) by the top ten represented ARC/ABS Fields of Research (FoRs) and career stage.
 Please note the numbers in the plot area refer to career stages.

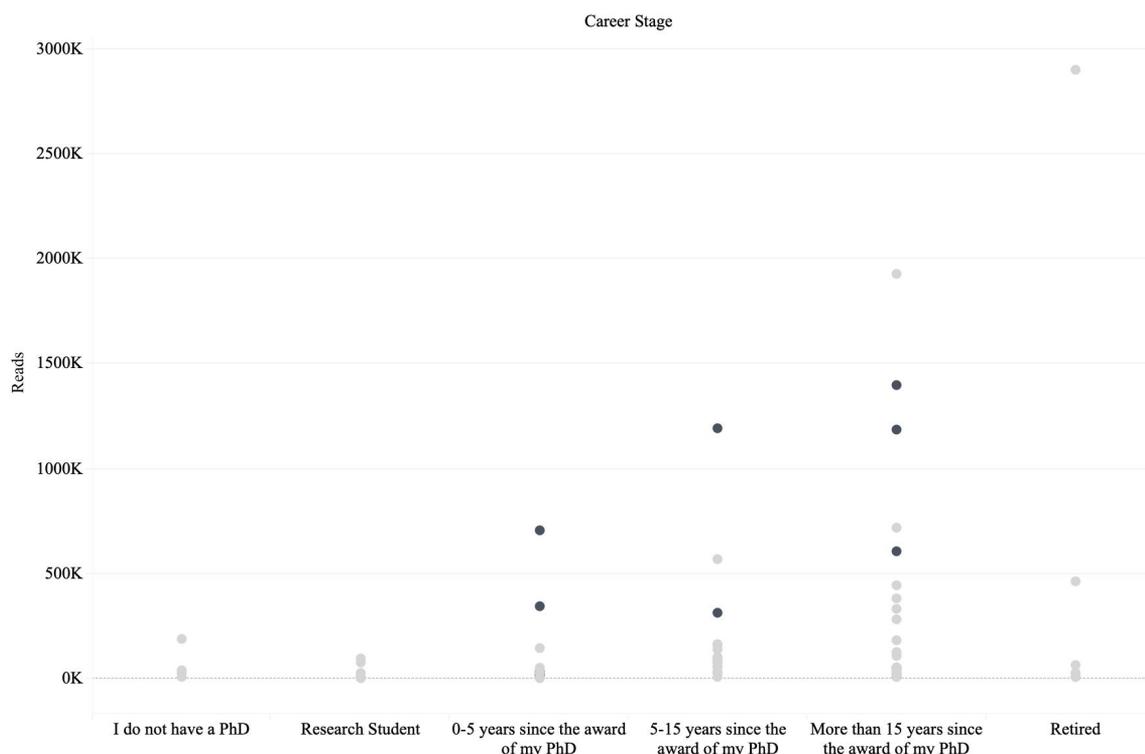


Figure 3: Cumulative number of reads across articles published by *The Conversation* by author. Authors we interviewed from this dataset are indicated in black, and are relatively high performing authors based on the available metrics from *The Conversation*.

public on issues related to their research. We asked scholars about their motivations for using amplifier platforms to disseminate their research, how long they had been doing so and if they planned to continue contributing to sites like *The Conversation*. We also asked them about their broader communication strategies, if they used social media and what they thought the effects of such activities have been on their career. We were also interested in gauging the support they felt they had from their institution, and whether or not there was any form of recognition, formal or otherwise, for such activities.

In addition to the pilot round, we also conducted another two rounds of interviews, each with a purposive sample of scholars. In the second round, we interviewed researchers from Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs – in addition to *The Conversation*, the Cooperative Research Centres Association is the other of our Linkage project partners) and communication professionals from CRCs who were tasked with publicising the centre’s research. In the third round, we interviewed early-career researchers to understand why they contribute to amplifier platforms given the need to establish a record of traditional academic publication. In this third round, we sought to elicit career narratives from early career researchers who are engaged in substantial teaching, service

and research work building a profile for themselves in their field and institution.

In total, over the three rounds, we conducted interviews with 20 scholars.

Findings

The ethical imperative to disseminate evidence-based research

In light of the limitations of traditional quantitative measures of impact and to augment the alternative metrics generated by amplifier platforms, we sought to elicit narrative accounts about how scholars had achieved impact with their work and how they tried to contribute in a highly contested and compromised public sphere. One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the interviews was the emphasis academics put on the importance of evidence-based research being used in public debate:

‘But it’s really important to be communicating to the public evidence-based messages ... there’s a lot of people out there blogging stuff on social media and it’s a bit of a mess sometimes. But there are some good voices out there in the world of social media that are sharing some good stuff.’

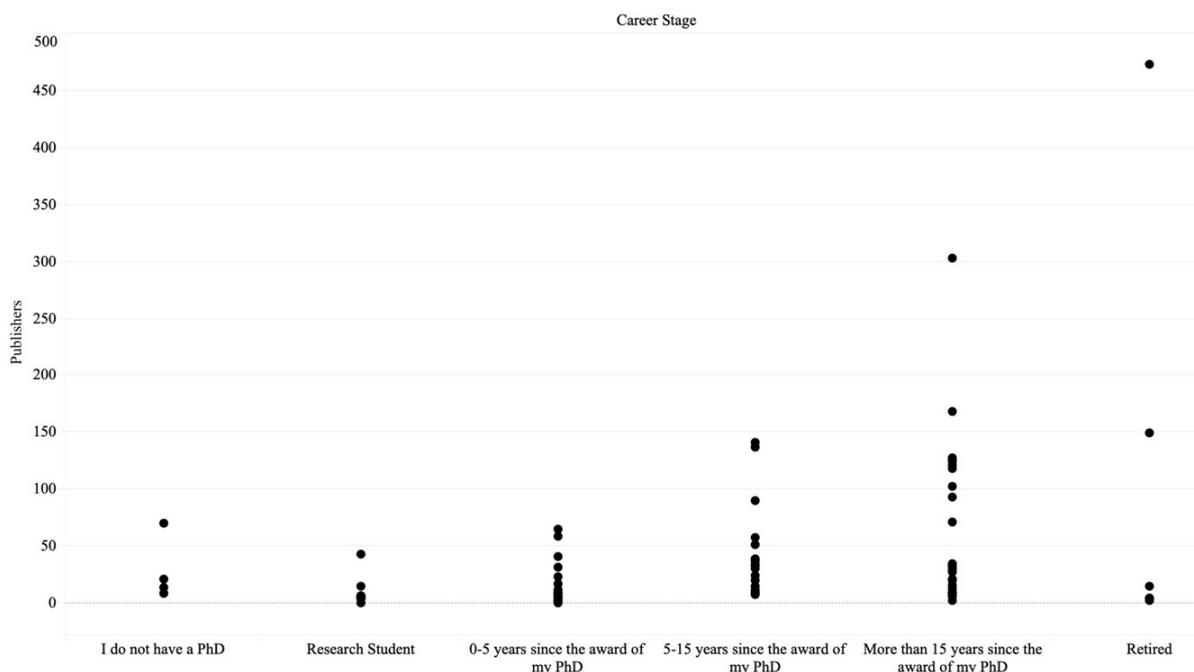


Figure 4: Cumulative number of republications in media outlets (for example SBS, ABC, IFL Science, Wall Street Journal) for responding scholars' *The Conversation* articles, by authors' career stage. Note the outlying author has 108 publications republished a total of 453 times. The next most highly republished author has 49 articles that have been republished a total of 303 times.

'If we're not there giving the information, then someone else will.'

'Evidence-based information in this day and age, it's a crowded space. And there's lots of voices out there that are telling their own stories and sharing their own opinions. It's really hard for the public.'

'But I basically think that we need to make sure that good information gets out to people'

For the select cohort of academics we interviewed, *The Conversation* was central to the communication of their research. It gave them the freedom to report their own research in a way that engages and connects with a general audience.

'I think when you do the sort of work I do you can kind of get a bit lost in academic concepts and constructs and thinking about deeper issues. And I think *The Conversation* helps you pull yourself back to explain what you're doing in a really pithy manner to a lay audience'

Writing for an amplifier platform like *The Conversation* fits well between their normal writing as an academic and other engagements with mainstream media.

'Often stuff in *The Conversation* gets picked up by other mainstream media. So, it's a good vehicle, often, for amplifying ...'

'So in terms of engagement probably for convenience, I think *The Conversation* has kind of worked nicely and so I probably prioritised that as the most, as the easiest kind of thing to integrate into work and research life. As an academic it sits well.'

The scholars we interviewed did not generally regard the mainstream media channels and platforms as first choice, but rather they are looking for where debates are happening. They are looking at engagement on a smaller scale where they can have real impact.

'I don't have that zealous approach to going out and prop-agandising for my field, that's not motivation for me. But more often I'll say, "Oh, this whole debate is really interesting isn't it"? So I find it interesting more than having an ulterior motive.'

'It's about sharing information and making sure people know that it's out there and where they can find it.'

'So letting people know and letting them know in a way that matters is important'

'Rural and regional publications. You know, they're probably far more important than getting a run on Channel 9 or in the Australian newspaper. So we want to get to those communities. So it's again, what does the audience read?'

'I just use those platforms because they're useful to get the

message out. But it's actually trying to get out a message that's important in terms of society as opposed to well, will this help me with my academic career and will I be on the telly and be a celebrity? It's genuinely about "this is appalling", if you read the report it's genuinely appalling And it's a good way of getting good academic work out into the light.'

The scholars we interviewed often emphasised the ethical aspect of engagement and impact. As researchers and scientists, these scholars see themselves as having a moral obligation to raise awareness of what the latest evidence actually says. This is especially important for issues like diet, nutrition and climate science which are highly contested on social and digital media. As Morin (2018, pp 3-4) notes:

By politicalising these issues and tying them to religious and political dogma, the ability of science educators to change attitudes, and perhaps behaviours, fades. In response, some scientists have entered the public sphere to refute misinformation and spin by relying on the gateway belief model to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

While some of our interviewees expressed a concern that certain types of engagement on amplifier platforms might be seen as advocacy, most agreed that it is these highly contested areas – the environment, climate and health issues like vaccinations, diet and cancer prevention – that are most in need of scholarly contributions. And this type of engagement, via amplifier platforms or social media sites like Twitter, is important for impacting public opinion (Kotcher *et al.*, 2017).

Interviewees understood that there is no 'general public' or one mass audience for scholarly information. Instead, there are 'issue publics' and controversies (Papacharissi, 2015). There are many publics that benefit in different ways from engaging with evidence-based information and scholars have to make choices and target these different and sometimes overlapping publics.

'I see it as a kind of an ethical or political imperative to engage.'

'...here was data that was really important to understand.'

'But we also are a lot noisier on those platforms you referred to. The amplifier platforms like Twitter and Facebook and so forth. As well as very much involved in websites like *The Conversation*. I personally have written oh, I think about 35 pieces for them. But I was a very early adopter because I thought it was an excellent idea to get stuff beyond the classroom but still with credibility. And I like the freedom that offers.'

'I mean I knew it would be controversial, and I knew it would upset people.'

'I don't know if people who don't have clinician backgrounds, whether they feel differently. But it's really important to be communicating to the public evidence-based messages.'

Amplifying other quality research as an ethical imperative and to improve their own knowledge

Interviewees were not only interested in sharing their own research, but in writing about and amplifying other quality research. For some, it didn't matter so much where the quality research originates from, getting accurate, evidence-based information into the public domain took precedence.

'I thought well I suppose I could write it up, it's not my work but I'm in a good position, I've followed this whole field for a long time although it's not my expertise. So, I wrote [*The Conversation* article] over a weekend. And I absolutely couldn't believe the take-up. Of course I had no idea whether it would get a 100 reads or a 1000 reads or what, but [my colleague] kept on emailing me and saying, "Wow this is going crazy, it's going viral".'

'But you tend to specialise in certain things. Whereas you do actually have a huge bank of expertise that you don't necessarily use for peer-reviewed research or for big projects and things like that. But being able to put things out there in that way, it's a different outlet but I also think it's valuable.'

Benefits other academic activities

As Charlotte Frost argues in *The Digital Academic*, using and producing digital media content gives scholars additional skills and potentially "an alternative route to career success" (Frost, 2017, p. 37). The scholars we interviewed were clear that writing for a general audience on an amplifier platform also benefits the other work they do as an academic. Our interviewees often spoke about how the writing skills they gain translate to writing in other forums. Journal articles are clearer and grant writing more compelling, as they are able to tell better stories about their research.

'And although success rates in NHMRC are very poor, I've had a record better than most people. And I kind of knew this one was going to get up, I thought this is just such a good story, it's so simple, everything ties in and this is simple.'

'Probably more so for writing grants I guess. So I'll tell the story and I'll compel the panel why they should be giving me money for my project.'

'The narrative is front and centre rather than the numbers.'

'It's only after having had the experience writing these articles I think my own scientific writing has benefitted a little bit from it. Like telling the story, writing something that you know can grab someone's attention quickly... I think it's improved my writing.'

Open models promote republication and increase reach and engagement

Amplifier platforms improve the dissemination of scholarship because their open models mean greater reach and republication rates. Stories that the scholars we interviewed

have written in the Australian edition of *The Conversation* have been picked up by international outlets like CNN and the BBC, along with mainstream Australian outlets like the ABC, SBS, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Guardian*. In addition, an increasing number of popular media sites are republishing content from *The Conversation*.

'I mean who would have thought *Mamamia* would publish a long essay by an academic ...? But they do. And those sorts of audiences are really important, I think, for academics.'

'Yeah looking at the matrix of *The Conversation* to see where it was going as well really interested to see how many reads it was getting and it was amazing.'

'I've had contact from the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New Scientist* saying they saw the stuff in *The Conversation*. Interview on such and such, you get a lot of contacts like that. A lot of contacts from other researchers who have seen it and republished it, and a lot of contacts not always favourable, from the general public.' [Laughs]

'A Creative Commons publishing system, such as *The Conversation* provides, is just a brilliant outlet. I think that the republications are really interesting, and also the kind of spin off media that you get.'

'So sometimes you do get quite a wide much wider reach than you think.'

'I don't mind the republishing aspect of it, I guess what troubles me is it's become a bit like an echo chamber, you're getting exactly the same views across a range of platforms, it's very hard to get another view in there. And look I know what's driving it, it's basically journalists are pretty tight these days. It's a way of saving money and sharing so you know on the one hand it's fine to republish in different mastheads but I would just like to see a wider variety of views to be honest.'

'I was at a barbecue and a friend of a friend said "Oh I was reading something on my phone and oh, you wrote it" and it was on *Mamamia*. I was like, "Oh yeah, yeah I know the article but I didn't realise it had been republished through that outlet".'

Amplifier platforms are good pathways to other media, including international media. But they can also connect a scholar with a specialised niche community which can benefit from their expertise.

'I had a film contract with an Australian outfit, and the BBC

– currently having negotiations with them at the moment... I mean *The Conversation* certainly got it out there there's no two ways about it, no one's going to read the peer review publication. *The Conversation* was really what blew it up.'

'Because to me [as a senior scholar] you know, it takes me a couple of hours to write a *Conversation* article and I get hundreds of thousands of reads and lots of comments. It takes me six months to a year to write a [journal article] and approximately 200 people will cite it. So there's...if I want my opinion to go further there's no question where I should put my effort.'

'I was on an enquiry in NSW, a parliamentary enquiry into [this topic] because of the piece in *The Conversation*, and I wasn't very well published. And to be honest it's very hard to get publications on [this topic] into journals. So peer-reviewed journals, they don't really want to know about [it] because again, it's beyond non-normative.'

'Because of *The Conversation*, I did this interview and then I wound up on this committee, and now I can help...'

One of the key aspects of amplifier platforms is the ability for journalists to directly contact scholars. This can either be through their online profiles associated with their articles, or through the 'Find an expert' functions on

the platform. We found mainstream media are using *The Conversation* to contact academics directly and establish relationships with them. So where a public scholar in the past may have worked hard to establish a working relationship with a journalist, or journalists would contact university media departments, now media can contact the scholars directly through social media and amplifier platforms.

'To be honest I mean if I was to make a point about it, if I was a marketing person at [my university] I would be concerned about what it means for my long-term job security. Because they don't go to the [university] marketing people very often. They come straight to me. So Channel 9 emailed me straight, directly. I think *The Project*, no *The Project* went through [the university] media [department], but have in the past [come directly to me]. It's the third time I've done *The Project*. They have come straight to me.'

'...the AFR piece, I hadn't expected that invitation to come, and I was quite thrilled to be offered the gig because that is a new audience...I got a tremendous reaction from that article. Which I wrote in a couple of hours, it was written from the

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heart and that's what they wanted and it cost me very little time and I got a big reward from it.'

The Creative Commons licensing enables content to be republished widely, and can obviate the need for a scholar to engage with mainstream media outlets themselves:

'A Creative Commons publishing system, such as *The Conversation* provides, is just a brilliant outlet. I think that the republications are really interesting, and also the kind of spin off media that you get.'

'So I don't really pitch to newspapers, I've never really bothered. Because if you write a decent thing in *The Conversation*, it gets sucked into other outlets very effectively anyway.'

Institutional support for engaging on amplifier platforms

In addition to engaging with amplifier platforms and integrating impact activities into their workload, engaged scholars also need to negotiate their relationships with university and faculty media departments. As some university blogs are becoming media hubs that seek to emulate *The Conversation* or Scimex, scholars must decide whether to go through their own established media channels using connections with journalists or editors at *The Conversation* or funnelling their research through university departments with professional communications staff.

'At the university level we have a media department. Nice people and very helpful, but generally a bit off the pace. Normally the horse has bolted before they actually get onto it.'

Not all the scholars we contacted as part of this study were familiar with it.

'It would help if you defined what "*The Conversation*" is. I have never heard of "*The Conversation*".'

For those based in outward-facing, industry-focused research centres, impact and engagement with different publics is often embedded in research from design to completion. (This is now an emerging expectation throughout the university sector.) Among the cohort, which was a purposive sample of Cooperative Research Centres (the Cooperative Research Centres Association – CRCA – is also a research partner) representatives, their main focus was on targeted publics and targeted stakeholder communications strategies. (Most of these interviewees were communications officers employed by CRCs.) This diminished the priority they placed on maximising general public communication using general amplifier platforms like *The Conversation*.

'Our focus is very much on stakeholder communications and student communications.'

'But we do use a bit of social media, but it's not at this point in time a priority for us, because it just does not align with what we're trying to do.'

'Well it really depends when things become patented and licensed and things like that as to when we can actually start really talking about it.'

This is not to say that CRC-based communications staffers didn't acknowledge the importance of a variety of media channels for communicating with their stakeholders. While not used extensively, amplifier platforms are still an important part of the landscape.

'So general social media has its just blah that's come out. Whereas you get to *The Conversation* and there is a degree of confidence that it is reasonably close even though it may be a strong opinion one way or another it's not defamatory it's based around some form of evidence and it is somewhat robust.'

In the general interviewee cohort, we found some junior scholars are planning careers outside of the academy. Therefore, engaging with the public on amplifier platforms and providing links to their scholarly work is particularly important as a way to profile themselves with potential employers. The commitment to amplifiers and public communication was as much about giving them options beyond academia as it was an attempt to consolidate their academic prospects. This speaks directly to the countervailing pressures on ECRs.

'I don't believe in all honesty that academia in terms of the current model has any influence on practice at all. Because I don't think the people really bother reading our papers and when they do it's great but you know we produce a massive piece of work and put it into a couple of articles and then publish them academically. You know you're really missing reality--for want of a better term. So I automatically go to *The Conversation* as an outlet for publishing or at least alerting people outside of the academy.'

The rising expectations around engagement and impact can often pile another task onto an often already overloaded junior scholar's workload. Junior scholars and early career researchers (ECRs) have been hard to reach for this project due to sheer busyness. Many were too busy during semester, and then were away on field research, or too busy engaging in research activities during the break. Of the six early career researchers (four from the dedicated round and two from the pilot round) we interviewed, only one has an ongoing full-time faculty position. The others are part-time, in research-only roles in dedicated centres, or working outside academia. We found some strong evidence of highly-focused strategic support in research-intensive institutes and centres.

At the other end of the career spectrum, many engaged researchers are established scholars who approach engagement as a social imperative, and who have the relative luxury of being more able to decide how to allocate their time in favour of such activities. For many junior scholars, however, their time is often viewed, by the senior scholars they are working with, as being better spent on traditional academic publications.

'Unless you've got 20 publications in with your PhD you've got no chance of getting a Fellowship. It's just nonsense, so I think it's kind of reaching breaking point now.'

'Although you know to say there's no formal recognition for it, it is brought to the attention of Heads of School and pro-Vice Chancellors and people up the line, so that's useful. For me the main value I see in it for them is just the ability to talk to normal people. To get out of the science-y mindset. And as I say, I always say, "I think this is going to help your writing."

'...yeah I think a lot of my colleagues are a lot more senior in terms of age as well as experience as academics. And a lot of different opinions about the value of doing this sort of thing.'

Discussion

The Engagement and Impact agenda is evolving in the UK and Australia as an adjunct to research quality assessment exercises (the REF or Research Excellence Framework, and Engagement and Impact (EI) as part of Excellence in Research Australia, or ERA). Of course, as Mats Benner (2018) points out, there are few university systems worldwide that are not engaged in debates about, or deeply embedded in, engagement and impact – although it is the 'gift' of the Anglosphere, and particularly the UK and Australia, to wish to seek to measure it in countrywide assessment exercises conducted independently of university jurisdiction.

Accompanying these exercises are urgings to build engagement and impact into the conceptualisation of research rather than to add their consideration *ex post facto*, and the re-drafting of research grant applications to draw attention to such urgings and give it a weighted value.

We identified several key characteristics of engaged scholars that support the research literature canvassed in our previous article (Osman & Cunningham, 2019). They align the value of amplifying research on sites like *The Conversation* with more than one outcome; they recognise being able to tell a good story has impact; and they are prepared to wade into controversial topics. Engaged scholars use amplifier platforms to communicate current research on topical issues, including work that is not their own. This type of proactive engagement needs to be supported at an institutional level, so that a full range of academics (not just senior and established scholars) can contribute to public debates on issues that matter. The academics we interviewed noted a mostly informal and uneven

level of recognition for activities in amplifier platforms, but they were divided on whether or not this recognition had any effect on long-term career prospects in academia. Recognition and focus were higher for interviewees in dedicated research institutes.

The scholars we interviewed expressed strong moral sentiment that evidence-based information should be in public debates, especially regarding controversial issues like climate change. They recognise the limitations of traditional academic publishing and this heightens the potential of amplifier platforms. Benefits also include improvements in grant writing and subsequent outcomes. But there is a marked difference in our sample between established senior scholars whose governing ethos might be characterised as 'giving back', and ECRs (who were purposively sampled because of the difficulty of reaching them), for whom such engagement was much more challenging and institutionally-influenced.

Given global concern about the spread of misinformation and a lack of effective expert voice on crowded and contested digital media platforms, scholarly contributions in these spaces are becoming increasingly valuable – both for scholars themselves and the quality of public debate. And given that the result of the first Australian engagement and impact assessment exercise led Minister for Education Dan Tehan to remark that the results show that 'university research is improving the lives of every Australian' (Ministers for the Department of Education and Training, 2019), it is important that institutional support is provided for these kinds of activities. Support in the form of service or workload allocation for engagement and impact using amplifier platforms, that can be measured using metrics like republication and readership, offers a new way for recognition and reward for scholars' public communication.

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