

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Digital Public Criminology in Australia and New Zealand: Results from a Mixed Methods Study of Criminologists' Use of Social Media

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media in the 'post-broadcast era' has profoundly altered the terrain for researchers to produce public scholarship and engage with the public. To date, however, the impact of social media on public criminology has not been subject to empirical inquiry. Drawing on a dataset of 116 surveys and nine interviews, our mixed-methods study addresses this opening in the literature by examining how criminologists in Australia and New Zealand have employed social media to engage in public criminology. This article presents findings that examine the practices and perceptions of criminologists in relation to social media, and insights from an analysis that explores the political and logistical issues raised by respondents. These issues include the democratising potential of social media in criminological research, and its ability to provide representation for historically marginalised populations. Questions pertaining to 'newsmaking criminology' and the wider performance of 'public criminology' on social media are also addressed.

Keywords

Digital criminology; public criminology; public engagement; social media.

Please cite this article as:

Wood MA, Richards I, Iliadis M and McDermott M (2019) Digital public criminology in Australia and New Zealand: Results from a mixed methods study of criminologists' use of social media. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 8(4): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v8i4.956>



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Introduction

The proliferation of social media in what has been termed ‘the post-broadcast era’ (Merrin, 2014) has the potential to create new avenues for public and community engagement with criminological scholarship. As numerous commentators have noted, social media offers platforms for promoting emerging research, networking with academic and non-academic audiences, and facilitating stakeholder involvement in discourse and debate on criminological issues (Barak 2007; DeKeseredy 2011). Echoing calls for social media-facilitated public engagement by researchers of digital humanities and public sociology movements (Daniels and Thistlethwaite 2016; Schneider and Simonetto 2017), some, such as Schneider (2015, 41) and Powell et al. (2018, 199), have even advocated an ‘e-public criminology’ or ‘digital public criminology’ that capitalises on the affordances these new technologies provide for public criminology and newsmaking criminological practices.¹

Despite eliciting considerable commentary, criminologists’ use of social media to engage in public scholarship has not yet been subject to empirical inquiry. To facilitate more empirically-grounded conversations around digital public criminology, in this article, we explore Australian and New Zealand (ANZ) criminologists’ engagement with, and practices, experiences, and perceptions of public scholarship undertaken using social media. Drawing on a dataset of 116 survey responses with ANZ criminologists, and nine interviews with early career to professor-level criminologists in Australia, this article examines how criminologists in Australia and New Zealand have employed social media to engage in public criminology, as well as the key challenges they have faced in doing so.

Social media and public scholarship: A brief overview

In the post-broadcast age, social media, narrowcasting and prosumption have outpaced one-to-many forms of broadcast media, broadcasting, and consumption (Merrin 2014). While broadcast media in certain contexts remain central to the twenty-first century mediascape, the dominance of ‘legacy’ radio, television, and, most of all, print media, have arguably been challenged in the ‘newsmaking’ realm by the advent of participatory social media. The effect of this shift on the criminological landscape has been well noted. Pratt (2007), for example, argues that new media have become a key facilitator of penal populism, while more recently, Lee and McGovern (2013) demonstrated how law enforcement and criminal justice agencies use social media to engage in crime and justice ‘newsmaking’.

Indeed, while contemporary criminological issues and debates take place in and via the internet, including social media, it is unsurprising that sociological inquiry itself has proliferated in similar domains. Responding to this emergent trend, a body of scholarship has examined the opportunities social media provide for public scholarship, including scholarly blogging (Kjellberg 2010; Mahrt and Puschmann 2014; Solum 2006), micro-blogging (Mahrt et al. 2014; Sullivan 2017) and self-archiving via open-access sites (see Lupton 2013). Social media have led to the rise of the digital humanities (Burdick et al. 2012), while in the social sciences, these media have heralded the rise of digital sociology or ‘e-public sociology’ (Schneider 2012, 2017). This shift is characterised by areas of scholarly activity dedicated to an ethos of digitally facilitated collaboration and networked scholarship that is publicly available (Lupton 2014). Criminologists have commented on the potentialities of such forms of digital public scholarship for some time. Barak (2007, 203), for example, asserted that ‘websites, blogs and podcasts are the preferred newsmaking criminological media of tomorrow’, while DeKeseredy (2011, 93) notes that ‘using Facebook to help achieve social justice is a contemporary technique of newsmaking criminology that attracts more ... people each day. So are blogging and other new means of exchanging information’.

Within this 'new media' environment, criminologists have further developed their own social media domains. These include virtual public criminological 'blogospheres', such as *Public Criminology*, which includes testimonies from stakeholders in criminal justice processes, interspersed with insights from contributing criminologists articulated in easy-to-understand, lay terms. Elsewhere, criminology scholars have shared their work over dedicated academic social media platforms, including Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and Mendeley, as well as the unrestricted, open-access online database of pre-print research, SSRN (formerly 'Social Science Research Network'). These platforms allow researchers to share versions of their work to bypass the publication 'pay wall', connect with scholars in similar fields, and use 'altmetrics' (alternative citation impact metrics) to gauge the exposure and reception of their work. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise that, along with the benefits of social media engagement, corresponding measures of research impact (such as altmetrics and 'likes', 'shares', and 're-tweets'), increasingly function as key performance indicators in neoliberal academic settings. As Giroux highlighted (2002), in institutional environments characterised by a neoliberal ethic, corporatised, commercialised, and individualised performance expectations have created harm for researchers and students, while compromising the representativeness and integrity of 'humanities' research in particular.

While criminologists' social media use may, in some respects, belie the negative impacts on academia of political-economic pressures, media engagement can also generate new avenues for social science research to become more inclusive and reflexive. If the type of 'newsmaking criminology' described by Barak (1988) was largely unidirectional, participatory social media now offer the potential development of a public criminology that is truly dialogical. In this context, members of academic communities, and the broader public, can respond to criminologists' work, while criminologists themselves may engage with their audiences in real time.

With attention to existing debates, this article contributes to a conversation about how ANZ criminologists may engage with a 'criminology of the public' through social and new media forums—an issue that was, for instance, recently raised by Goldsmith and Halsey (2017, 472) in an editorial for the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*. In doing so, it sheds light on the role of digital technology in public criminological domains and accounts for researchers' perceptions of the benefits of public scholarship, as well as its perceived political, ethical, and logistical limitations.

Methodology

Our study employed a two-phase mixed methodology comprised of a survey and semi-structured interviews (Iliadis et al. 2019). The first phase was a survey featuring a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions, while the second phase consisted of follow-up semi-structured interviews with survey participants to elaborate on their survey responses. Both phases are discussed in greater detail below.

Phase 1: QUAN-qual survey

The QUAN-qual phase of our research was a census survey of criminologists employed in teaching and/or research positions at universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland and South Africa. In this article, we analyse the 116 survey responses (of a total of 1,211 completed responses) returned by ANZ criminologists.²

Timely responses from international survey participants were facilitated by the online survey tool *Survey Monkey*, which we used to design and host our survey questionnaire. Our questionnaire and broad internet survey-centred approach is indebted to the instruments and approach of the LSE GV314 Group (2014) in their study of British politics scholars' news media engagement, and Lupton's (2014) study of academia and social media. Survey participants were

primarily recruited via email; however, as a second recruitment strategy, we posted advertisements and links to the project's website on our LinkedIn, Twitter and Academia.edu accounts, and encouraged our online connections to share or retweet these posts. To avoid the shortcomings of 'opt-in' internet survey sampling, we generated our own sampling frame using publicly available information on criminologists employed at higher education teaching and research universities in ANZ. In keeping with the academia-oriented scope of our research, we identified potential participants for recruitment by referring to biographical and contact information on university websites. Although this approach has its limitations (see Westbrook and Saperstein 2015), as detailed below, it facilitated a reasonably representative sample of ANZ criminologists in terms of gender and academic rank.

Sample

The survey ran between 10 August 2017 and 10 April 2018. During this period, 116 complete responses were received from researchers working in Australia (n.102) and New Zealand (n.14), with respondents self-identifying gender, academic rank and career stage. Respondents included early-career (n.48), mid-career (n.43) and senior researchers (n.25), with most identifying as women in Australia (63.7% = n.65) and New Zealand (57.1% = n.8) respectively. A further 36.2 per cent of survey respondents (n.37) in Australia and 35.7 per cent (n.5) in New Zealand identified as male, while one participant from New Zealand identified as gender fluid. To establish how representative our sample was, we compared it with known values for the population by conducting one-sample chi-square tests for gender and academic rank ($\chi = \text{chi}$). The results of these one sample chi-square tests indicated that our sample was not significantly different from the population in terms of gender ($\chi^2(\text{df} = 1). 2.610, p = .106$), and not significantly different from the population in terms of academic rank ($\chi^2(\text{df} = 4). 2.845, p = .4161$).

Phase 2: Interviews

The second phase of our research involved semi-structured interviews with 24 criminologists and criminal justice scholars in Australia, the United Kingdom and United States. From the sample of survey participants who expressed an interest in participating in a follow-up interview, we purposively sampled participants for maximum variation along the lines of: (a) their academic rank; (b) their self-identified gender; (c) the country in which they reside; and (d) their responses to survey questions. To this end, the interviews added insight into key trends and frequencies that emerged in the survey data.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations of our methodology in this research. While our methodology was cross-sectional and allowed us to draw correlational inferences about social media use among ANZ criminologists, it did not enable us to infer causation in relation to the variables we examined. Further, given that our questionnaire did not measure self-identified personality traits (e.g. 'extroversion' or 'introversion'), we could not account for their impact on individual criminologists' social media practices. Several participants noted that they avoided engaging with 'the media' because they were introverted, indicating that the relationship between self-identified personality variables and social media engagement represents a potentially valuable avenue for future research. Finally, although it may be less of a limitation and more of a 'thought bubble' for future research, we did not triangulate our survey and interview data with publicly available observational data on criminologists' social media behaviour. Such naturalistic data could serve to not only complement and corroborate findings from participatory research projects such as ours, it might also extend our understanding of issues facing academic researchers online, including their potential experiences of trolling, harassment and abuse.

Findings

What social media are ANZ criminologists using in their professional lives and which media do they find most useful?

Survey responses indicated that Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and Twitter were the most widely used social media platforms by ANZ research participants in a professional capacity; 54.3 per cent of respondents indicated that they used Academia.edu and/or ResearchGate, while 45.6 per cent used Twitter (see Table 1).

Table 1: Social media used by ANZ criminologists in a professional capacity

<i>Social media</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Academia.edu	63	54.3
ResearchGate	63	54.3
Twitter	53	45.6
LinkedIn	52	44.8
Facebook	32	27.5
Google+	12	10.3
YouTube	9	7.7
Personal blog	8	6.8
Multi-authored blog	3	2.5
Wikipedia	3	2.5
Instagram	2	1.7
SlideShare	1	0.8
Does not use any social media	13	11.2
Other	6	5.1
Missing	17	14.6
<i>Total: 116</i>		

Correspondingly, ANZ respondents indicated that, to a greater extent than other platforms, they found these three to be the most useful in promoting their academic work (see Table 2).

Table 2: Social media ANZ criminologists find most useful in their professional lives

<i>Social media</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Percentage of users who find platform useful for promoting their work</i>
Twitter	48	41.3	90.5
ResearchGate	37	31.8	58.7
Academia.edu	33	28.4	52.3
Facebook	24	20.6	75
LinkedIn	16	13.7	30.7
Personal blog	4	3.4	50
YouTube	3	2.5	33.3
Multi-authored blog	3	2.5	100
Google+	2	1.7	16.6
None of them	12	10.3	-
Other	5	4.3	-
Missing	13	11.2	-
<i>Total: 116</i>			

The apparent importance of Twitter to survey respondents may perhaps be interpreted as reflecting a broader movement in 'e-public sociology' (Schneider 2017), public criminology and newsmaking criminology, toward the use of interactive, brief and open domains such as 'websites, blogs and podcasts' (Barak 2007, 93). Furthermore, the move to an 'open' and inherently 'public' platform such as Twitter for criminologists in particular may be a symptom of the disciplinary emphasis on translational policy impact in the Australian social sciences (see DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz 2018), which is likewise reflected in survey respondents' reference to 'impact' in their discussion of social media 'benefits' (discussed further below). At the same time, the use of Twitter by ANZ criminologists is likely related to a co-occurring situation in which academia and advocacy tickertapes on Twitter, guided by preferences and the algorithmic ordering of information for circles of followers (Powell et al. 2018), are at times accused of fostering conversations between researchers and (in a lesser capacity) practitioners, while these conversations may not reach the subjects or intended public audiences of criminological research (see Loader and Sparks 2011). As will also be discussed below, certain respondents were mindful of this risk and actively sought to engage diverse publics through their social media activity.

For potentially different reasons, academic-oriented social media, such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, were also widely used by survey respondents and deemed useful for promoting their work. This is perhaps related to various characteristics of the platforms, which facilitate access to research (sometimes bypassing a paywall), research collaborations, and the opportunity to comment on work in related fields, while benefitting from peer review and feedback.³

More broadly, it is important to note that while 27.5 per cent of respondents used Facebook, and 44.8 per cent used LinkedIn, only 20.5 per cent stated that they found Facebook useful for promoting their academic work. Only 13.7 per cent of criminologists maintained that LinkedIn was useful. As one of the first-online vocational social media platforms, LinkedIn extends to a number of public, private, and professional fields beyond academia and is often consulted (typically outside academia) by prospective employers. Among several likely reasons as to why LinkedIn was less useful for ANZ criminologists, two appear the most significant. First, LinkedIn targets job seekers outside academia. Second, while still 'open', the site is less 'public' than Twitter, lacking Twitter's interlocutory blogging interface, making it less useful in facilitating public debate and discussion (Papacharissi 2009).

Why ANZ criminologists use social media in their professional lives

When considering why ANZ criminologists use social media in their professional lives, we must attend to a number of issues reflected in survey responses. These include, most significantly, the social media that respondents are likely to be referring to, the motivations of respondents to engage with social media in a professional capacity, and the perceived benefits they experience when they do engage with these media. Table 3 sets out the 'most attractive' features of social media for respondents.

Table 3: Most attractive features of social media for ANZ criminologists

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Australia</i>		<i>New Zealand</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
Publicise research	61	59.8	6	42.8	67	57.7
Public engagement and discussion	55	53.9	6	42.8	61	52.5
Academic profile	45	44.1	4	28.5	49	42.2
Demonstrate the impact of their research	23	22.5	1	7.1	24	20.6
Discipline benefit	21	20.5	0	0	21	18.1
Enjoyment	17	16.6	1	7.1	18	15.5
University publicity	12	11.7	3	21.4	15	12.9
Not needing to adhere to academic language and convention	8	7.8	1	7.1	9	7.7
None of the above	6	5.8	3	21.4	9	7.7
Promotion	8	7.8	0	0	8	6.8
Networking	3	2.9	2	14.2	5	4.3
Drawing attention from funding bodies	4	3.9	0	0	4	3.4
Recruiting participants	3	2.9	0	0	3	2.5
Total: 116 (including eight skipped)						

Two trends regarding the ‘most attractive features of social media’ were immediately apparent and reflected in the large percentages of respondents who favoured social media’s potential to ‘publicise research’, facilitate ‘public engagement and discussion’ and raise a researcher’s ‘academic profile’. The first and third of these reasons listed are arguably interrelated and indicate an overarching interest on the part of ANZ criminologists to use social media for the purpose of profile raising and academic ‘self-branding’ (Duffy and Pooley 2017). The second attractive feature of ‘public engagement and discussion’ perhaps pertains more closely to researchers’ use of open and public micro-blogging fora, such as Twitter, to communicate work and research findings. This incentive for criminologists to engage with social media was reflected in participants’ open-ended responses to a question regarding the ‘key benefits of using social media to engage in public criminology’, which we will now address.

Broadening readership

While a number of ANZ criminologists highlighted social media’s potential to facilitate an expansion and diversification, or ‘broadening’ of their readership (10.3% = n.12), it is necessary to acknowledge that this was often discussed coterminously with other benefits. Of various associations between benefits, three were the most prevalent. First, the association of expanding readership with the pursuit of professional agendas was often rooted in some notion of political emancipation for the subjects of criminological research, and its audiences. Second, raising awareness of certain criminological issues, affecting translational social and policy impact by communicating the findings of criminological research, and educating the public on criminological issues were often broadly related in survey and interview responses (see Currie 2007). Third, respondents expressed a desire to increase the accessibility of criminological research for non-academic audiences through social media apparatus. While these benefits are by no means distinct, they (to a greater or lesser extent) represent differentiated extensions of the overarching aim to ‘broaden’ the scope of social media publics exposed to criminological research.

In the first instance, a major perceived benefit of using social media in the service of social democratisation and for political emancipation echoes Carrabine et al.'s (2000, 208) 'public criminology' agenda of 'promoting social rights' and 'undoing social wrongs'. This was evident in survey respondents' willingness to challenge dominant 'news media narratives', which they variously perceived to inaccurately portray the circumstances of socio-politically marginalised populations, and to shed light on issues that are often otherwise misrepresented or misinterpreted in mainstream media, politics, and public domains.

In one noteworthy case, a senior lecturer from Australia stated that one of the benefits of engaging with social media in a professional context is that it 'gets to a wider audience ... there are many misconceptions about crime and offending so I feel it is the duty of those with knowledge to help disseminate information for the general public to counter misinformation' (Senior lecturer, female, Australia). Similarly, a lecturer in New Zealand argued that social media may be used to challenge false narratives, namely 'dominant discourses around crime and justice; [while] trying to centre evidence-based approaches (particularly important considering current "law and order" politics)' (Lecturer, New Zealand). Others in the Australian context agreed that social media may be used to 'dispel misinformation about crime and society' and 'influence policy through influencing opinion' (Lecturer, female, Australia), while they otherwise asserted its usefulness in 'counteracting popular myths/misconceptions about crime and offending' (Senior lecturer, female, Australia).

Both early-career and professor-level criminologists further highlighted the need to 'expose the public to alternative perspectives than those typically presented in conservative mainstream media' (professor, female, Australia), and '[provide] the public with the facts they need to get "interested" in a specific topic that might not receive that much TV/Radio attention' (lecturer, female, Australia). In line with this sentiment, one Australian mid-career criminologist asserted that social media 'provides a legitimate avenue of voicing the experiences of Indigenous peoples that is often ignored by mainstream media and mainstream criminology' (lecturer, female, Australia). In this dimension, social and cultural context seemed to have implicit relevance for the imperatives and agendas that would underlie criminologists' engagement with social media publics. Another mid-career senior lecturer highlighted, for instance, the need to 'promote a deeper understanding of criminal justice system and processes in Australia (e.g., miscarriages of justice and their implications)' (associate professor, male, Australia).

While the sense of social responsibility felt by some ANZ criminologists was pronounced, the tension between 'truths' and 'values' in social science research, and the moral questions this raises, was also implicitly acknowledged (for context see Carrier 2014). Although the relevant survey question called for qualitative data on the 'benefits' of using social media in a professional capacity, a number of respondents highlighted the need to communicate research and influence policy, while at the same time engaging in a dialogic and reflexive way with social media audiences.

The philosophical underpinnings of this idea perhaps lie most directly in Bourdieu's (1998) theory that the 'critical collective intellectual' may effectively mobilise resistance against what he famously described as late modern capitalism's 'utopia of exploitation'. Advocates for this vein of activity may, perhaps, be interpreted in relation to the cogitations of Burawoy (2005), one of public sociology's first major proponents, who called for 'dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope' (Burawoy et al. 2004, 104). In relation to the mutual importance of creating impact and promoting dialogue, for example, two early-career lecturers respectively cited the reflexive nature of social media and its utility for 'networking; hearing of emerging research/issues/policy etc. [and] promoting research' (lecturer, female, Australia), as well as 'opening up information and ideas to a wider audience, sharing ideas and knowledge, [and] learning from others' (lecturer, male, Australia). Alluding to

the exploitation of social media as a vessel for communicating information about issues of contemporary policy relevance, one mid-career criminologist from Australia stated that she used the platforms for 'sharing criminological knowledge with wider audiences; demonstrating to students the relevance of criminology to real world issues; networking with other scholars; [and] engaging with contemporary issues' (senior lecturer, female, Australia). Others interested in the dialogic potentialities of social media interaction simply noted the utility of such platforms for 'being part of public conversations' (lecturer, female, Australia), and 'bridging gaps between academics and those outside of academia' (lecturer, female, New Zealand).

The notion of 'bridging' and overcoming ontological and epistemological divides between criminologists, their subjects, and publics who might engage with criminological research, was, from the perspective of several survey respondents, connected to the architecture and affordances of social media platforms themselves. In this aspect, certain respondents expressed particular concern with avoiding the sometimes-observed 'paternalistic' nature of public criminology (Ruggiero 2010, 2012), an assertion usefully elaborated by Carrier's (2014, 89) argument: 'the fact that many, if not most, calls for public criminology are premised on a conception of the criminologist as the master of truth on crime and punishment, is not without limitations and paradoxes'. In implicit relation to this issue, several survey respondents cited the potential for social media to quickly reach broad and diverse audiences, while these audiences can respond and express their opinions to the researcher and broader public in real time.

Echoing Sunstein's (2018) concern about social media, intellectual representation and the limits of 'direct democracy', the benefits of social media participation were, at times, weighed with respondents' desire to retain control over their own message. With social media communications, as one senior lecturer put it, 'you are in control of the message' (senior lecturer, female, Australia). Highlighting a related perceived benefit that academic research communicated via social media was available for public consumption without an onerous peer review process, other respondents cited the 'immediacy of dissemination vs academic publications' (lecturer, female, New Zealand), where social media was observed to offer a 'direct audience' without the imposition of an arbitrating 'middle man [sic]' (lecturer, female, New Zealand). In relation to the role of traditional academic press and news media in message dissemination, certain respondents also foregrounded the benefits of 'not needing institutional gatekeepers, having control over what is posted' (senior lecturer, male, Australia), 'frame[ing] arguments in your own terms to various publics' (associate professor, female, Australia), and the fact that 'you can say it how it is and it doesn't get distorted' (senior lecturer, female, Australia).

Networking

Beyond the benefits associated with broadening readership, a small number of respondents (4.3% = n.5) emphasised how social media afforded considerable networking opportunities with other academics, public sector workers, and criminal justice practitioners. For some, this online networking occasionally led to academic speaking engagements and other professional opportunities, such as collaborations with other academics and consultations with public sector departments. As noted by one Australian lecturer:

I have established relationships with new collaborators through social media (particularly Twitter); has helped to establish new academic networks; has meant that journalists and people working in govt/public sector are more aware of my work and have approached me for advice as a result; has assisted in applying for jobs and promotions by illustrating impact and community engagement, relevance of my work to spheres outside of academia. (lecturer, female, Australia)

Similarly, in describing how she had benefitted professionally from her social media use, a senior lecturer (Female, Australia) noted:

More people are reading my work and I get invitations to present in government and non-government sectors. It has also resulted in members of the public reading my work and contacting me.

As with previously discussed benefits, the desire to use social media for networking was not always divorced from other perceived social and professional benefits. Networking was often rhetorically associated by respondents with the notion of broadening their readership, and with the wider social function of their research. An Australian researcher asserted, for example, that social media is beneficial for ‘communicating research to, and engaging in a dialogue with, the broader public; strengthening the quality of public debate and engaging with other academics outside of your immediate networks’ (lecturer, female, Australia).

ANZ criminologists’ views on using social media in a professional capacity

There is a perception that social media is a great polariser in academia, creating both vocal proponents and detractors (Veletsianos 2016). Among the latter, social media is often criticised on a number of grounds, from its ‘time-wasting’ potential—a criticism voiced by several of our participants—to claims that it elicits self-promotional behaviour and shallow engagement with key issues. Drawing on Orr’s (2010) perspective, we might refer to certain pejorative views of social media as social ‘mediaphobia’. While there were exceptions, and ‘time-wasting’ was cited as a concern by a small number of participants, our survey data provided little evidence of social mediaphobia per se among ANZ criminologists. Few criminologists agreed (7.7 per cent) or strongly agreed (2.9 per cent) that ‘the better criminologists tend to keep off social media’, with most either disagreeing with the statement (39.8 per cent) or neither agreeing or disagreeing with it (38.8 per cent) (see Table 4).

Table 4: ANZ criminologists’ attitudes towards social media

	Percentage				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is the duty of criminologists to appear on social media to talk about their work	3.8 (n.4)	25.2 (n.26)	33 (n.34)	30 (n.31)	7.7 (n.8)
Criminologists who engage with the public on social media generally improve the standing of the discipline	4.8 (n.5)	33.9 (n.35)	52.4 (n.54)	7.7 (n.8)	0.9 (n.1)
Scholars who discuss research on social media tend to ‘dumb down’ research	1.9 (n.2)	9.7 (n.10)	40.7 (n.42)	44.6 (n.46)	2.9 (n.3)
The better criminologists tend to keep off social media	2.9 (n.3)	7.7 (n.8)	38.8 (n.40)	39.8 (n.41)	10.6 (n.11)
Total: 103 (excluding 13 skipped)					

When asked a series of related questions regarding criminologists’ use of social media, few also disagreed (7.7 per cent) or strongly disagreed (0.9 per cent) that ‘criminologists who engage with the public on social media generally improve the standing of the discipline’, and few agreed (9.7 per cent) or strongly agreed (1.9 per cent) that ‘scholars who discuss research on social media

tend to ‘dumb down’ research’. Respondents were more evenly split on the question of whether ‘it is the duty of criminologists to appear on social media to talk about their work’. However, they skewed towards disagreeing with the statement, with 30 per cent and 7.7 per cent strongly disagreeing. Thus, while marginally more ANZ criminologists did not view digital public criminology on social media as a duty for members of the discipline, they were not, for the most part, critical of those who did engage in such practices.

ANZ criminologists’ concerns about social media engagement

Just over 17 per cent of participants (n.20) stated that they had no concerns related to the use of social media in a professional capacity (see Table 5). However, most participants who responded to this question raised at least one concern regarding the professional use of social media (see Table 6). These ranged from the potential for content to be misinterpreted (6% = n.7), to concerns regarding privacy and the time commitment involved in using social media effectively (3.4% = n.4). It is worth noting that many of these concerns echoed those expressed in other studies of academics’ use of social media (Lupton 2014), and as such, are not discipline-specific. Five ANZ criminologists, for example, emphasised the adverse time commitment associated with social media use, with one senior lecturer from New Zealand stating:

I don’t have time to engage in more work on social media. I think if you are going to use social media then you need to have time to devote to keeping it up to date, re-tweeting stuff, replying to comments etc. (senior lecturer, female, New Zealand)

While most concerns voiced by participants were not discipline-specific, a number of the most prevalent concerns, including apprehension over trolling (10.3% = n.12), backlash (6% = n.7), and misinterpretation (6% = n.7), were expressed in response to the often-‘sensitive’, ‘contentious’, or ‘emotive’ subject matter criminologists engage with. Indeed, when asked if there were any topics they would avoid discussing on social media (elaborated further in the following section), a number of participants stated that they would refrain from discussing what they described as particularly ‘contentious’ or ‘controversial topics’ (3.4% = n.4), or ‘emotive’ current events (0.8% = n.1).

Table 5: ANZ criminologists’ concerns about social media⁴

<i>Concerns</i>	<i>Australia</i>		<i>New Zealand</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
No concerns	19	18.6	1	7.1	20	17.2
Trolling	11	10.7	1	7.1	12	10.3
Backlash	6	5.8	1	7.1	7	6
Communicating complexity	7	6.8	0	0	7	6
Misrepresentation/misinterpretation	6	5.8	1	7.1	7	6
Time commitment	4	3.9	1	7.1	5	4.3
Blurred line between public and private	3	2.9	0	0	3	2.5
Contentious/undesirable debates	3	2.9	0	0	3	2.5
Total (including 52 skipped)	102	100	14	100	116	100

Harassment and trolling

By far the most common concern ANZ criminologists voiced about social media was becoming a target of online abuse, harassment, or ‘trolling’, as several respondents put it (10.3% = n.12). In stating this, it is important to note that ‘trolling’ is a nebulous term that has shifted in common parlance from its former, more specific use. Originally conceptualised as the practice of making provocative and inflammatory statements online to elicit a response, the term trolling is now commonly used to refer to generic practices more akin to online abuse, harassment and ‘flaming’: hostile personal attacks made against another online (Beckett 2017). Trolling might, for some academics, represent unsolicited, inflammatory comments designed to ‘bait’ users into an argument. Given the recent change in the meaning of the term, however, for other respondents, the current potentiality of the troll is likely a far more nefarious and threatening one than the threat of ‘trolls’ as they were previously represented. Indeed, several respondents stated that their primary concern was threatening rather than annoying or inflammatory exchanges online. In particular, a number of female scholars singled out gendered, sexualised, and/or racialised online abuse as a particular concern in their professional use of social media. As noted by one Australian associate professor:

Women and racialised minorities are abused, harassed, and threatened via social media on a regular basis. I don’t think the Uni understands the risks of asking us or our students to use social media, and I don’t think the Uni would have my back if I were being attacked via social media. (associate professor, female, Australia)

This concern was similarly raised in Lupton’s (2014) survey exploring academics’ social media use, in which she found that numerous respondents had little confidence they would receive institutional support in the event they were harassed or threatened on social media.

Backlash

After trolling the second most common concern about social media voiced by criminologists was the potential for backlash, in a number of forms. Though a number of respondents provided no detail on the nature of the backlash they feared from social media, several singled out occupational backlash as a chief concern. One lecturer in Australia stated:

I am very recent out of my PhD, so I am cautious and not confident in my ability to promote my research to larger, more general public audiences. I would worry that something I wrote on social media could reflect badly on me which would not be advantageous to my career. (lecturer, female, Australia)

The above lecturer’s comments reflect a longstanding concern felt by scholars in several fields regarding public backlash—a concern that pre-dates but has perhaps been amplified by social media. Occupational backlash may, however, also take other forms. One Australian professor emphasised the potential for social media to correlate with a perceived conflict between advocacy and neutrality—a conflict that can have flow-on effects when funding bodies use social media for ‘intel’ on researchers:

Funding bodies and organisations that are being researched use social media as ‘intel’ to assess your credentials. Social media erodes a researcher’s sense of neutrality. The things you retweet or share or post convey a clear picture of you personally, professionally and politics that is very public - and that creates risks for funding, fieldwork and even collaborations. (professor, male, Australia)

In the domains of crime and justice in particular, those who promote intersections between activism and scholarly research, sometimes termed ‘scholactivism’ (Kramer 2016; Ramsey 2018),

might seek to emphasise the onus of responsibility academics at public universities have to share their research and broadly seek to effect progressive social and political change. In Australia during the last decade, for instance, scholactivism has developed in response to xenophobic news media narratives about high-profile crime-related situations (see Powell et al. 2018). As statements such as the above indicate, however, a key tension exists between the desire of some researchers to advocate for particular policies, and the occupational necessity to appear neutral, or relatively 'objective' to criminal justice practitioners and political stakeholders. We stress that this issue may become further exacerbated by conservative professional-political mores, and by 'collapsed contexts' in which Twitter and Facebook blur once clearly demarcated boundaries between private and public media use (Davis and Jurgenson 2014).

Topics ANZ criminologists avoid discussing on social media

Criminology is a discipline that, perhaps more than any other social science, is characterised by the 'sensitive' nature of its subject matter. The 'emotive' nature of crime and crime control can, in fact, partly account for the 'hot climate' of contemporary public discourse around crime and penal policymaking that Loader and Sparks (2011) diagnose and describe as unique to twenty-first century social and political situations. As alluded to in the previous section, this 'hot climate' of contemporary public discourses in relation to crime and criminal justice is acutely felt by many criminologists engaging with the public on social media, whose interactions range from heated all the way to outright flaming, harassment, and abuse.

Equally revealing in this respect were topics that participants indicated they would avoid discussing on social media. While most of these were not explicitly identified as 'sensitive' or 'controversial' by participants, many bear all the hallmarks of issues that fall under one or both of these discursive umbrellas. Among the topics mentioned by numerous participants, for example, were sexual offending or 'sex crimes' (4.3% = n.5), race and crime (3.4% = n.4), offender rights (2.5% = n.3), and gender (2.5% = n.3).

Conversely, despite the aforementioned concerns over backlash, abuse, and misinterpretation, only 14.6 per cent (n.17) of participants indicated that they would avoid discussing specific topics publicly on social media. Most participants stated either that there were no topics they would avoid discussing on social media (26.7% = n.31), that there were probably no topics they would avoid (2.5% = n.3), or that they would discuss anything but be mindful of their approach (6.8% = n.8). Others indicated that the only material they would avoid discussing publicly online would be unpublished findings (1.7% = n.2), issues they did not have expertise in (1.7% = n.2), or content that would threaten the confidentiality of participants (1.7% = n.2).

Within the context of criminology, these findings certainly challenge increasingly prevalent accusations levelled at academia for its observance of 'political correctness', where academics are criticised for censoring their communications and avoiding issues that might be perceived to exclude or marginalise socially disadvantaged groups (see Kitrosser 2016; Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). Contra to these accusations, the overwhelming majority of ANZ participants stated that there were no topics they would avoid discussing. In highlighting this fact, we do not wish to undermine or treat with disregard the perspectives of academics who do avoid discussing particular topics online. Several participant responses indicated, understandably, that a reluctance to discuss certain issues can be the result of earlier negative experiences with online engagement, including incidents of severe harassment and abuse.

Conclusions

In summary, the ANZ research participant responses examined in this paper demonstrate that social media has, for both good and ill, changed the terrain for researchers to practice public engagement and communicate criminological scholarship. As noted by Schnieder (2015, 41) and

Powell et al. (2018, 199), an 'e-public criminology' or 'digital public criminology' facilitates new forms of 'newsmaking' within the discipline of criminology, while simultaneously providing for reflexive engagement with stakeholders of criminology, and the subjects of criminological research, such that an emergent crime research and social media nexus has the potential to be both democratising and dialogical.

Specific benefits of engaging with social media noted by our research participants beyond its broad-based democratising potential include broadening their readership, extending their reach to a global audience, and meeting expectations related to their institutional affiliations. Participants also cited the potential for social media to increase the international traction of their research, thereby enhancing opportunities for future research collaborations, research recognition and policy and social impact. From a professional perspective, networking was identified as a leading benefit of engaging with social media to discuss research. Social media offered them fora for networking with other academics, stakeholders and criminal justice practitioners, while at the same time receiving feedback from and providing representation to those most affected by discourse on criminological issues. For criminologists in our study, these were also significant professional considerations insofar as social media allowed them to publicise their research and enhance their academic profile.

Despite their myriad benefits, other aspects of the research indicate that social media are not a panacea for the ills facing public criminology. Survey and interview participants highlighted potential limitations of social media for criminological engagement, including harassment and trolling, particularly in relation to research conducted by and in relation to socially marginalised groups such as women, and people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Respondents also cited the potential for social media engagement to elicit and facilitate backlash against criminologists—for example, where the distinction between advocacy and neutrality becomes blurred. Reflecting on these limitations, we acknowledge that promoting public criminology in the wake of social media requires scholars to become adept at not only the production of knowledge, but also the dissemination of information. As noted by Stein and Daniels (2017, 14), researchers must 'learn how to become translators' for criminological publics, marginalised populations and lay audiences—a skill that, we argue, carries ethical, logistical, and professional implications in the 'post-broadcast age'.

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¹ Echoing Burawoy's (2005) inclusive conceptualisation of public sociology, we understand public criminology to broadly refer to criminological research practices that engage with various publics beyond the academy. This includes not only 'newsmaking' practices but also an array of other activities such as influencing policy debates, shaping cultural depictions of crime and justice, and providing representation to subjects of criminological (and justice) research who may otherwise be under- or misrepresented.

² While we recognise the potential benefits of extending the scope of the analysis to include other countries under focus in our broader research, we have decided to focus specifically on the ANZ context so that we do not sacrifice analytic 'depth' for 'breadth'. Given that a number of research participants' responses were relevant specifically to the ANZ social and political context, we have sought to maintain this focus in our analysis and discussion.

³ While opportunities for open access research collaboration and dissemination have long been facilitated by the SSRN repository (circa 1994), this platform does not constitute a 'social network', or online, for-profit social media enterprise in the same way as do Academia.edu or ResearchGate. As such, it was not a key focus in our research.

⁴ Due to the low response rate across some categories, these have been removed from the table.

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