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[Control, resistance and 'the data university': towards a third wave critique.](#)

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A Radical Geography Community

Intervention – “Control, Resistance, and the ‘Data University’: Towards a Third Wave Critique”

by The Analogue University[1]

From Auditing, Controlling, to Desiring Data

The term “neo-liberal university” has become shorthand for a range of contemporary pressures in university life (Burrows 2012; Strathern 2000). However, increasingly we are not only considering specific pressures – such as workload, anxiety, and the reduction of research to profit – but also the general position of the university itself in history (Chatterton et al. 2010: 251; Gill 2009; Mountz et al. 2015; mrs c kinpaisby-hill 2011).

In an early critique of the neo-liberal university, Marilyn Strathern (2000) put the bifurcation point for North American and European Universities around the turn of the new millennium, when neo-liberal metrics and audit culture moved from the worlds of business and accounting into mainstream academic life. This *first wave of critique* of neoliberalism in the academy saw education as a public good being forced to mimic the market where academic values could be maintained by strategically (yet often sneeringly) “playing the game”.

However, according to Roger Burrows (2012: 357), universities have in more recent years passed “‘beyond the audit culture’; towards a different hegemonic project where systems of ‘quantified control’ begin to possess their own specificity beyond mere auditing procedures; where there develops an ability not just to mimic, but to enact competitive market processes”. In what could be considered this *second wave of critique*, the metrics have become generative and active – constitutive of new forms of subjectivity and freedoms. Everyday life within the university is today subjected to the “green light” of “blue chip” (higher rated) funding sources, high “impact journals”, “time-management charts”, “promotion criteria”, “university impact case studies”, “student feedback metrics”, and many other data streams. Burrows (2012: 357) says that the rise of auditing metrics has had affective qualities; the reduction of things to “number and numbers” is generative of new “structures of feeling” across the university that goes beyond specifics. We are witnessing rising stress levels caused by metric-culture, increases in aggression, fatigue, exhaustion, and substance abuse, decreases in collegiality, and the erosion of work-life balance (Gill 2009; Mountz et al. 2015). Crucially here, the movement from the first wave of marketization to this second wave “structure of feeling” is about how academic *values* have been transformed as academic *value* has become more fully monetarized (Burrows 2012: 368). It is thus no longer possible to play the game without internalizing its rules and assumptions.

So too, a range of documented counter-responses and resistances have emerged in the critical literature: for example, the “slow university movement” and its focus upon taking the time to be collegial, quality rather than quantity, disconnecting from 24-hour email, smartphones and league tables (see Berg and Seeber’s [2016] “slow professor”; Mark Carrigan and the “Accelerated Academy” project; Mrs Kinpaisby’s [2008] “communiversity”; Paul Routledge’s [1996] “third space”). The general point then is that, whether one agrees with the details or not, in a world of new data openings and control apparatus, we are now witnessing a range of attempts to rescue the university from itself.

In this short intervention, we want to explore the possibilities for a *third wave of critique* related to the changing nature of academia. More specifically, we argue that we are now witnessing the emergence of the “Data University” where the initial emphasis on the primacy of data collection for auditing and measuring academic work has shifted to *data coding itself as the new exchange value at work* and productive of new subjectivities and freedoms. This third wave critique requires drawing a schematic line that now takes us beyond the intensification of neo-liberalisation, the internalisation of market values and associated affective structures of feeling to understanding our new digital and big data world. Influenced by Deleuze’s (1992) work on new societies of control, we argue that the genesis of the “Data University” lies in our *active* desire for data and its potential to mediate human relations and modulate our *freedoms*. This is absolutely central to our schematic for a third wave of critique: compared to older disciplinary societies like the school or prison institution (see below), today individuals both desire and are controlled through the active generation of proliferating data streams.

This desire goes beyond merely responding to institutional demands for data. Rather, it is demonstrated by the self-directed enthusiasm with which academics voluntarily subject ourselves to the creation of our own data streams such as “Academia.edu” hits and Twitter “followers” and Google Scholar “citations”, and how we intentionally develop strategies for maximising these metrics – and take pleasure at watching them rise. Writing from the older perspective of the first and second wave critiques noted above (often centred upon neo-liberalism), Bond (2017) recently criticised Academia.edu for posing as an educational public good when it is in fact a venture capitalist enterprise extracting monetary value from the freely-acquired results of our academic labour. Although we strongly share such critical concerns, our “third wave” objection to Academia.edu is that in the new data societies of control (Deleuze 1992) it is academics themselves who seek out new forms of freedom, and are therefore controlled, through our own generation of proliferating data streams. The question is therefore not only one of venture capitalism, but the personal desire to watch our own stock rise according to the data streams.

Indeed, fluctuations in various data streams and codes (such as Academia.edu, Twitter, world university rankings, student satisfaction metrics and the like) have now arguably become one of the main exchange values that mediate human interaction in the daily life of the university and beyond. This can result in many problems. At the more obviously offensive level, this can lead to academics submitting massively over-inflated grant applications which may not necessary help research or communities themselves, but whose “value” does help individual academics move up university league tables. But perhaps even more fundamental is how *modulation* according to data – a term which Deleuze (1992) sees as central to the new control societies more generally – has become the new watchword that reconfigures our everyday freedoms and subjectivities.

At this point, we make two caveats. Firstly, we do recognize that portals such as Academia.edu may offer some academics and non-academics access to scholarship behind the paywalls of extortionate library subscription fees. Moreover, other more progressive publication platforms, or other more area-based publications, open up possibilities for mobilizing the subaltern agency of criticism by publishing work by local artists and writers. However, many global North universities do not subscribe to these journals and other such non-ISI (Institute of Scientific Information)-indexed

journals[2] creating a series of “closed loops” of research where global North and South debates do not always meet. The result is a skewed data stream of power where global North journals continue to dominate and their debates are held up as “exemplary”. Here, the pressures to make work freely available can therefore be driven by strong ethical concerns to expand the range of debate.

Secondly, we are still very much concerned with the forces of neo-liberalism and audit culture. However, we are also concerned with how data proliferate as an expansive and fluctuating *exchange value* in the Data University, precisely because they are aligned with a reconfigured sense of *expanded freedom*. Indeed, to be more precise, for us the Data University is not actually about “numbers” or “metrics” in the way it once was, but better characterised as a new control society of fluctuating “codes” and “passwords” (Deleuze 1992) that open doors for us so long as we agree to accept and produce them. This is why the dominant pathology in the university becomes so *intensive* – forever modulating oneself according to the data streams.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s (2009: 178-179) book, *The Soul at Work*, is particularly applicable to new societies of control like the Data University: “The dominant pathology of the future will not be produced by repression, but instead by the injunction to express, which will become a generalised obligation.” Here ever-proliferating types of student satisfaction scores, publication metrics, departmental league tables, or whatever new and *extra* data stream emerges next week, matter because these obligations to express fundamentally mediate human interaction and freedom. Modulation according to the coding becomes, as Deleuze (1992) said, the key survival tactic in today’s societies of control. In the Data University, “[c]ontrol is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit” (Deleuze 1992: 6). Indeed, one can imagine a time, perhaps not too far from now, when the main reason for having two monitors attached to your computer is so that you can work on one screen, while watching, on the other, for real time fluctuations in student satisfaction scores, Academia.edu hits, or the achievement of “blue chip” status for certain grant schemes. As in the free-floating stock market, by the end of the day the university, the department or the individual academic themselves can close “down” as well as “up”. Although this may sound like a pitch for a new episode of Charlie Brooker’s dystopian comedy series *Black Mirror*, it hints at a foreboding future reality.

As we have been arguing, such possibilities already suggest that we are now leaving older critical models of power, oppression, surveillance, and resistance behind. As Deleuze (quoted in Galloway 2014: 105) says:

[Foucault] ... was actually one of the first to say that we’re moving away from disciplinary societies, we’ve already left them behind. We’re moving toward control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication ... Compared with the approaching forms of ceaseless control in open sites, we may come to see the harshest confinement as part of a wonderful happy past. The quest for “universals of communication” ought to make us shudder ... Computer privacy and viruses, for example, will replace strikes and what the 19th century called “sabotage” (“clogging” the machinery) ... The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control.

Most academics are neither able nor inclined to hack into the university IT systems to disrupt the ever-proliferating and intrusive metrics that mediate everyday human relations at work. Moreover, a key point is that many too have found a renewed sense of freedom in self-generated data streams. Yet, as Deleuze points out, today’s new control societies do pose a real problem for questions of resistance; precisely because the coils of this serpent are more complex than the older disciplinary structures between society and individual (see also Berardi 2009). We are at a new phase where the question has become less about older forms of dissemination or competition mediated through Foucault’s understanding of institutions and disciplinary power, than with how new forms of freedom and control are being configured and rewarded through the power of data.

Resisting the Data University

Resistance to the Data University is multiplying in the UK (where we are currently based), from localised movements like Aberdeen’s “[Reclaiming Our University](#)” to the UK-wide “[Campaign for the Public University](#)”. We use a recent dispute at Newcastle University to raise some questions about resistance. We do not claim to be speaking on behalf of the whole campaign, but rather based on ongoing qualitative research we are conducting at that institution offer some initial perspectives on resisting the Data University.

In the summer of 2015 Newcastle’s senior management launched a series of documents called “Research Expectations and Performance” as part of its co-called “Raising the Bar” (RTB) agenda. This was an outcomes-based performance management regime intended to reposition the university more positively in key metric exercises including the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) audit and the *Times Higher Education* “World University Rankings”. These expectations were quantities of grant income obtained, top journal publications, and PhD supervisee completions – all for individual academics. They were largely unobtainable, and potentially could lead to dismissal or shifts to less favourable contracts of academics on what was euphemistically termed “the tail”. RTB thus unleashed a culture of fear – but also significant resistance – across the university.

This resistance was not part of a coordinated campaign, occurring at different sites and scales with a range of actors with a variety of objections to RTB, both principled and pragmatic. Nonetheless we identify five strategies which challenged data production, collection and desire.

Firstly, the repression of the desire for data as an individual practice to challenge the economy of academic production. Following Phil Cohen’s (2015) distinction between academia as *career* (whereby data are used to demonstrate status in competition with others in a market economy of worth) and *vocation* (operating within a moral economy of worth, where data are irrelevant because the value of work performed is the means of satisfaction it produces), some Newcastle activists engaged in personal disciplines of refusing to use citation indices such as those produced by Google and Academia.edu, and ignoring impact factors of journals when it came to publication choices.

Secondly, emphasising humanity over the “H-Index”. Martin Buber (1953) wrote about the distinction between “I-Thou” and “I-It” relationships, whereby the other is seen as either in relation with self or as a discrete, separate object. RTB required middle managers (heads of departments/schools) to use a green-amber-red “traffic light” system to codify each member of staff according to their performance against the metrics, with “the tail” of scholars indicated by “red” lights requiring radical and potentially coercive intervention. We describe this as a change from an “I-Thou” relationship of care and support, to an “I – I.T.” relationship of spreadsheet manager to codified (and expendable) resource. Many middle managers reacted angrily against this, refusing to place RTB as central to performance management as senior managers desired.

Thirdly, the production of data was to some extent resisted. An attempt in one faculty to introduce an “External Quality Audit” at the same time RTB was being rolled out was successfully pushed back by middle managers. The local branch of the University and College Union (UCU) organised industrial action in the form of a boycott of undergraduate marking, depriving management of the data it needed to progress and graduate students. The union mobilised international networks of support, including a petition on the website Change.org. The management feared the growing reputational damage to the university – reputation being precisely what is measured in the World University Rankings. On 6 June 2016, three days after the strike formally began, the management backed down and agreed to withdraw both the RTB terminology and the expectation metrics.

Fourthly, Newcastle academics engaged in strengthening the spaces and practices of collegiality. This was done in myriad ways such as taking time out to have corridor conversations with colleagues and organising school- and/or department-level meetings to share concerns about the RTB agenda in an open and supportive manner. More established members of staff also provided care and support to newer members by making the time to advise and guide them in their response to RTB. The aim was to create spaces of caring and mentoring where we were allowed to discuss our concerns and anxieties without the fear of undermining our academic identities. In fact, we felt it was absolutely necessary to create and sustain spaces for shared dialogue and solidarity within the university to provide a counterpoint to the demoralizing demands of the RTB.

Fifthly, as noted above, for Deleuze it is extremely difficult to generate resistance in our new societies of control. Yet, it is precisely at this point that we now want to applaud Newcastle University managers. The agreement between senior management and the UCU to end industrial action over RTB recognised that “it is problematic to focus exclusively on quantitative targets” (Newcastle UCU 2016). Notwithstanding the long and often complex and heated debates, management did eventually listen to many of our concerns resulting in a more collegial atmosphere at work. New ideas for research have also developed from our collective and collegial involvement in the protest. One new research theme concerns what we are now calling the rising phenomenon of the Data University in UK and other areas of higher education, and how this engages fundamental debates concerning the broader proliferation of new societies of control (Deleuze 1992).

Changing the Data University

In concluding, we do not want to critique our specific university so much as address our concerns more generically to the rise of Data Universities; in particular, the active role that we all play in this.

Firstly, although it still takes place to some extent, the Data University now works less by placing individuals under surveillance than by reducing people to “dividuals” – discrete data that can be modulated, aggregated and disaggregated in any number of ways (Deleuze 1992: 5). Like the stock exchange, in the university today “control relates to floating rates of exchange” (ibid.) associated with data streams and codes. Many of these streams are generated by the university, but, crucially, many are created by academics themselves keen to invest their time and energy in social media feeds, citation indices, and related domains.

Secondly, the stakes here can be very high indeed for the changing nature of resistance. Although it was successful, the RTB protest was a rather old fashioned form of dissent and act of solidarity, especially when it came to industrial action as a means of achieving its ends. Moreover, the resistance strategies we discuss here are not open to everyone because of the inequalities produced by precarious employment contracts now common place in our universities (Chakraborty and Weale 2016). Resistance to the use of citations and impact factors may be easier for more established and tenured academics than their early career (and especially pre-tenured) colleagues. Indeed, the structures of inequality associated with the “socioalgorithmics” (Nakamura 2009) of “race”, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability all determine how and to what extent differently situated staff can (or are permitted to) oppose the demands of the data university.[3]

In many other ways the wider question of how, or whether, we can all challenge the “Data University” itself requires further reflection and research. Here our third wave critique underscores how it is important that we do not always frame the debate always in terms of “management” versus “academic”. This is not only of course because most managers at universities are also academics, but more fundamentally because many (dare we say “most”) academics ourselves are *actively investing* in the expanding freedoms that proliferating data codes generate. We are both disciplined and rewarded by the same metrics, and therefore data becomes seductive in the Data University. Thus, despite the success of the RTB protest, this more generally opens up wider questions of strategy, the

meaning and value of academic labour, and resistance. In thinking these questions through, what role is there for pragmatism, radical critique, anarchism, Marxism, and other philosophical traditions? Are new traditions of resistance now needed to grapple with such societies of control? We are publishing this intervention now, in these initial stages of research, to invite responses and to further debate on our changing universities.

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Notes

[1] The Analogue University is a writing collective of geographers and other scholars at Newcastle University. Some came together after the RTB initiative, others more generally have an interest in questions of data and control. Point of contact for this article: theanalogueuniversity@gmail.com

[2] ISI is a bibliographic database used to measure citation indices and produce journal impact factors preferred by universities and research funding bodies in the UK, USA, Europe and Australia.

[3] As a legacy of colonialism, there is a long history of the racialized and gendered foundations of data collection (McKittrick 2014) and its uses in commodification and surveillance (Browne 2010).

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Sabine Broeck

31 March 2017



thank you for this intervention!

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