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Full Name

Dr. Frederick Thomas Attenborough

Institution

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, Lincolnshire, LN1 3DY

Email addresses

Institutional: frederick.attenborough@bishopg.ac.uk

Private: attenboroughlets@hotmail.co.uk

Telephone number

01522 583746

Address

Room 06
Creative and Critical Arts Building
School of Humanities
Bishop Grosseteste University
Longdales Road
Lincoln
Lincolnshire
LN1 3DY.

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For public (and recontextualised) sociology: the promises and perils of public engagement in an age of mediated communication.

Abstract

This article argues for the analysis of public engagement as an essentially mediated activity. Although recent studies note “that” academic knowledge is increasingly being made available for consumption by non-academic audiences, they tell us little about “how” it gets recontextualised whilst passing through the hands of media professionals on its way towards such audiences. In Burawoy’s (2005) influential call for the rebirth of public sociology, for instance, just as in the debates his work provoked, the media is treated solely as a means for the transportation of knowledge. But as this article demonstrates, the media does not simply transport knowledge; it also, and at the same time, translates that knowledge in various, rhetorically consequential ways. Focusing on the mediated trajectory of an attempt by a group of British academics to connect with audiences beyond academia, their initial contribution is compared to its subsequent translation(s) across various British newspapers. A discursive analysis reveals the techniques via which a classic form of ‘public sociology’, wherein a seemingly personal trouble was refigured as an obviously public issue, came to be recontextualised such that, remarkably, these authors were left appearing to voice nothing but their own petty prejudices. The article concludes by noting that where public engagement increasingly involves mediation, public sociology needs to take more seriously the recontextualizing affordances of media discourse.

Keywords

Public sociology, public engagement, mediated communication, recontextualisation.

Introduction

In an increasingly mediated world little of the sociology we see, hear, read, laugh or get annoyed about in public culture does not at some stage pass through the hands, mouths, pens and typing fingers of intermediaries – journalists, bloggers, internet “trolls”, university marketing officers – before reaching its various audiences. To be sure, the advent of social – or “new” – media has allowed for a distinctly ‘dis-intermediated’ form of communication to develop between scholars and their publics (Healy, 2017: 771). But even here, our tweets, blogposts (or whatever) only ever reach beyond a small network of similarly minded scholars as and when they are picked-up by “old” media ‘presenters’ (Gans, 2016) – i.e. journalists, media personalities, broadcasters – who then repackage that information for consumption by massified audiences. Indeed, new and old media have now converged to the extent that an academics initial choice of communicational forum is largely irrelevant: a tweet in one context can quickly get filleted and networked into any number of other sites by presenters

and/or new media ‘citizen journalists’ (Small 2008). There is, in other words, an always already translated (Latour 1988), emplotted (White 1978), entextualised (Bauman and Briggs, 1990), grafted (Derrida 1977) or, as I prefer to describe it, re-contextualised character to all forms of public engagement that enter, and circulate within, public debate (also see Attenborough, 2014; 2015; 2016). In this article I explore the ways in which this process of recontextualisation, of communicating sociological knowledge from context to context, changes the level of authorial control that academics have over work offered-up during public engagement activities.

Of course, it is not just the exponential growth of new and old media, with all their attendant interactional affordances, that have reshaped the terrain upon which public intellectuals operate. Knowledge interests that we might, following Habermas (1979), describe as ‘emancipatory’ have long motivated some, if not most, academics to engage with audiences beyond the academy (see Giroux, 2011). Feminist academics, for example, precisely as incumbents of the category “feminist academics”, have always refused to treat the disciplinary world of academia as if separable from the realm of political activism. Indeed, many of the academics discussed later in this article orient to a tradition of feminist scholarship in which commitment to, and the pursuit and promotion of, gender equality sets the conditions of possibility for research in which “the public” is as much an intended audience as “other academics”. But this vision of public engagement, whereby academics *choose* to engage with various publics for emancipatory ends, is now supplemented by an instrumentalist vision in which engagement with external ‘partners’ and ‘stakeholders’ is seen as a good *in and of itself*, and something that *all* academics should therefore be incentivized to pursue (e.g. NCCPE, 2012; RCUK, 2013a, 2013b). The relatively recent adoption by European universities of organizational strategies, structures and values most commonly associated with the private sector goes some way towards explaining how we got here, to this new and increasingly valorised form of knowledge. In the new ‘corporate university’ (Giroux, 2011: 145) what is and is not valuable research is assessed and audited in the language of productivity: time/effort expended on research is now to be exceeded by the value of outputs generated, where “value” is measured not just by articles published but by commercialised products spun-off and/or governmentally cherry-picked social problems ameliorated. In the UK, the notion of “impact” has helped valorise this type of instrumentalism, injecting governmental, economic and managerial genres of discourse into the institutional talk, texts and practices of academia. The Economic and Social Research Council’s regular ‘funding calls’, for instance, place the onus on applicants to demonstrate

that and how projects will generate not just ‘academic impact’ *within* the academy, but ‘economic and social’ impact *without*, usually in collaboration with external ‘project partners’ (RCUK 2015). Perhaps unsurprisingly, debates about impact have predominantly focused on its consequences for academic freedom, autonomy and criticality (e.g. Collini 2012). But the burgeoning co-dependency between impact and public engagement is no less intriguing. The relatively recent adoption of impact as a significant component of the UK sector’s performance-based funding system, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), makes clear the nature of this co-dependency. HEFCE, the body responsible for overseeing REF, defines impact to incorporate not just the achievement but also the seeking of impact (Dunleavy, 2012). Co-dependency is also stimulated by the ‘impact summaries’ and ‘pathways to impact’ statements that now feature as mandatory sections of RCUK funding bids: both require prospective planning of public engagement activities, and, in the case of successful bids, retrospective reflections on the success of those activities (RCUK, 2015). Academics are in this way tested ‘not so much for their impact, but for their attempts to achieve impact...and their capacity to positively manipulate societal concerns by democratizing their knowledge’ (Watermeyer, 2012: 120).

The point here is that to ‘democratize knowledge’ is at least in part to utilise the media as a communicational resource. What we find, then, is that university-led attempts to reframe knowledge in terms of its socio-economic “impact” are encouraging ever more academics to pursue public engagement activities within a mediated terrain that remains relatively uncharted. This, of course, is fine – it is, after all, the promise of impact oriented public engagement to disseminate critical scholarship to the widest possible audience (also see Downey, 2017). But there are potential pitfalls too. One of the fundamental characteristics of mediated knowledge is that it never simply diffuses away from source, reaching intended audiences in pristine form. In that the media facilitates the communication of information *and* intervenes within that process (Tomlinson, 1999), knowledge is always translated as it is transported from academic to non-academic contexts. These translations may or may not be readably adequate. But they are rarely anything other than ‘beyond our control’ (Buckingham 2013, 51). And it is because the media acts in this way that ‘we have only limited opportunities, and limited power, to determine how our [i.e. academic] work will be represented in the public domain’ (Buckingham 2013, 52). Curiously, however, the literature on public engagement sheds little empirical light on the issue of how these processes of recontextualisation affect academic knowledge as it is turned into public knowledge. Consider, for instance, Burawoy’s (2005) highly influential call for the rebirth of

a truly public sociology. This type of sociology should, he argued, display less ‘disciplinary imagination’ (i.e. reformulating private-troubles as public issues for the purposes of arcane debates taking place inside the academy via the medium of analyst-driven meta-languages) and rather more of that which Mills (1958) termed the ‘sociological imagination’ (i.e. reformulating those same troubles as public issues but only now as contributions to societal debates taking place in the public sphere via the medium of everyday languages). Burawoy’s references to the media are brief, and it is this brevity that is of analytic interest here. To suggest that traditional public sociologists are those ‘who write in the opinion pages of our national newspapers where they comment on matters of public importance’ (2005: 7) is to background a whole array of intermediary presenters – journalists, editors, sub-editors, and so on – who prepare any given sociologists work for publication. It is unlikely that the final lexical, syntactic and rhetorical details of any published newspaper article, from its footing and focalisation shifts through to its added (or deleted) nominalisations and its manipulations of graphology, captions, headings and sub-headings, deictic markers, represented speech types and action descriptions will be a direct facsimile of a sociologists original words. And it is, of course, in the differences between what a sociologist wrote and “what a sociologist wrote” that we can find features of rhetorical – and semantic – consequence.

Much of the literature that followed Burawoy’s (2005) intervention is marked by similarly ‘black-boxed’ versions of the media. Buckingham’s (2013) already cited article, for instance, acknowledges that ‘we’ only have ‘limited opportunities’ to determine how our work gets represented in the media. But in the case-studies of prominent public intellectuals that follow, media headlines are too often assumed as evidence of their “high-profile statements”. In this way, an opportunity to study how their original statements were recontextualised as “their original statements” is lost. Similarly, in discussions of feminist public engagement that should be directly relevance to this article’s own case-study, references to the media very rarely go beyond impressionistic glosses. Gill (2011: 61), for instance, writes of how ‘sexism’, a term so crucial to second-wave feminists as they sought to engage public audiences, was eventually ‘mocked and hijacked by the media’; in a discussion of academic feminist activism, Braun (2013: 531) refers to the media as ‘not our friend’; and Boynton’s (2012: 536) discussion of innovative feminist media practices suggests that, in the mainstream media, ‘critical thinking or evidence [is] often sidelined’ (Boynton, 2013: 536-537), and/or ‘excluded, pigeonholed, mocked or misrepresented’, with the result that media engagement ‘may come with risks to our reputations’. Important observations of course; but observations that tell us very little about “how” this ‘mocking’ and ‘misrepresenting’ is

rhetorically, discursively and performatively constituted in and as part of mediated recontextualisation of feminist knowledge.

If I am in danger of labouring this point, it is because it is important one. In settings where academics write/speak for themselves they have a stake in formulating their work in accurate ways. In any mediated recontextualisation, however, a journalist (or ‘presenter’) gets to reformulate “it” on behalf of its original author(s). Academics in this way lose control of their words whilst all the while appearing to their (mediated) audiences as if still in control of them. Media discourse, as we shall see during the following case-study, can – *but crucially does not have to* – present academic knowledge in accurate, and thereby positive ways.

‘What Miss Really Means’

To capture some of these communicational challenges “in-flight”, as it were, I turn now to examine a body of sociological knowledge that began life as snippets of talk extracted from interviews with academics and then integrated into a *Times Educational Supplement* article entitled ‘What Miss really means’ (Bloom, 2014; henceforth WMRM). In global narrative terms WMRM can be decomposed into two constituent parts. There is first a description of a small, localised incident which is then followed by an explanation of how that small, localised incident can (and should) be seen as the result of wider societal trends, issues and problems. This practice of providing explanatory “links” that purport to connect locally engendered data to the wider social forces that (allegedly) shape such data, is a well-established part of what it means to do public sociology (also see Pomerantz, 1984). Indeed, WMRM is a perfect example of the sociological imagination in action: a private trouble is being measured up for its transformation into a public issue (Burawoy, 2005; Mills, 1959). In what follows, and for reasons that will hopefully become clear, it is the telling of that small, localised incident that constitutes the focus of our investigation.

What, then, does this incident involved? WMRM begins with a story in which an academic sociologist – Jennifer Coates – describes an experience she had whilst volunteering as a teacher at a secondary school. We learn of her surprise that, despite having been introduced as “Professor Coates”, students quickly started to call her “Miss” (see Extract 1, below). The telling of this incident is defensively designed: it is made difficult for us to read “it” as anything other than a symptom of some as yet unidentified public issue. Alternative readings whereby what happened might be explainable as the effect of personal troubles – simple misunderstandings, mishearings, Coates’ fragile ego, etc. – were pre-empted and designed-out. This cues us to find plausible, interesting and revelatory the explanations taking

place later in the article, as various social facts – linguistic socialisation, gender inequality, etc. – are depicted as the external constraints connecting this classroom-bound interaction to the wider society in which it took place. Initial description and subsequent explanation are thus aligned: the latter provides for a sociologically imaginative claim whilst the former evidences the need for the imagination. From this one, solitary incident we travel, logically and compellingly, towards a discussion of the types of linguistic reforms capable of generating less asymmetric, and by implication less gendered terms of address than Sir and Miss for male and female teachers. We, as readers, are given nowhere to go but sociological.

In nearly all recontextualised versions of WMRM, however, things were quite otherwise. In various rhetorically significant ways, the details of that initial incident were changed but then passed on (or perhaps “off”) as if they had simply been transported, word for word, from WMRM. Where WMRM’s description of the incident was defensively designed, these recontextualised descriptions are rendered defensively vulnerable. Coates’s experiences become immediately, and obviously, interpretable as the result of personal troubles – simple misunderstandings, mis-hearings, her fragile ego, etc. As readers, we are thus cued to find the sociological explanations that follow ridiculous, facile and egocentric. Having been granted this meta-position, having already seen this incident for what it really was, we are invited to laugh at Coates and the ‘arrant idiots’ (*Express Online*, 2014), ‘lunatics’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 2014), ‘bonkers’ feminists and ‘Potty PC Profs’ (*The People*, 2014) she is shown associating with as they attempt to evaluate this same incident as if it *really were* a public issue. In this way, description and explanation are pulled apart: the latter cannot but appear *im-plausible*, *un-interesting* and obfuscatory because the former has already revealed, to us as readers, an incident recognisable (and explainable) as a personal trouble. These recontextualisations give us anywhere to go but sociological. As a result, media reportage gets to mock an academic contribution to public debate without appearing to do anything but present, without embellishment, a contribution that *made a mockery of itself*. It is to the details of how this happened that we now turn our attentions.

Method and materials

With the aid of the keyword search function in *Nexis* (an online database), a corpus of 37 secondary reports was collected from UK newspapers (*Express*, *Guardian*, *Mail*, *Metro*, *Mirror*, *Nottingham Post*, *People*, *Sun*, *Daily Telegraph*), their internet spin-offs (*Express Online*, *Guardian Online*, *Mail Online*, *Telegraph Online*, *Times Online*) and an international news agency website (*BBC News*). The extracts selected for analysis are representative of the

methods of recontextualisation observed across the data-set. Data were analysed using mediated stylistics, an analytic approach that adapts tools from membership categorization analysis and stylistics to and for the study of media texts as inherently interactive, literary and intertextual phenomenon (see Attenborough, 2015): *interactive* in that they ‘display an orientation and sensitivity to’ their intended recipients (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1997: 727); *literary* in that features of what we might think of as strictly ‘literary language’ are also to be found in media texts (Jefferies and McIntyre, 2010: 3); and *hypertextual* in that they allow for (indeed in an internet-age “encourage”) massive polylogic games of “Chinese Whispers” whereby newer texts generate altered versions of older texts via processes of excision, expurgation, reduction and amplification (Genette, 1997: 5-8).

Analysis

Presented below are the opening sections from WMRM.

Extract 1 *TES* (May 17, 2014)

1. When Jennifer Coates began volunteering at her local secondary school, she
2. was formally introduced to her new students. This was Professor Coates, the
3. headteacher told them, formerly of the department of English language and
4. linguistics at the University of Roehampton. She had lectured in countries
5. including Australia, Germany, Denmark and the US. She was on the editorial
6. board of a number of sociolinguistic journals.

7. “Good morning, Professor Coates,” the children dutifully chorused. Then the
8. headteacher left her alone with the students. A girl put up her hand. “Miss,”
9. she said. “Miss, can you help me?”

10. “I was extremely surprised,” Coates says. “The men on the staff are all in their
11. twenties and they were all called Sir. I didn’t think there was this awful disparity
12. between professorial status and these young teachers, but they’re all Sir and
13. I’m not. It’s a depressing example of how women are given low status and men,
14. no matter how young or new in the job they are, are given high status.”

15. Coates noted the discrepancy because she was new to classroom life. For most
16. school staff, however, it barely registers. So embedded in our pedagogic culture
17. is the notion of female teacher as Miss and male teacher as Sir that few people
18. even notice that the two titles are not equivalent [continues]

The analysis is divided into two sections. The first compares WMRM’s version of the initial classroom incident as *more-than-just-a-personal-trouble* (lines 1-9) to its appearance in subsequent recontextualisations as *only-and-ever-a-personal-trouble*. In a similar vein, the

second section compares WMRM's reification of Coates's claim to have "discovered" an issue-in-a-trouble as solid and literal (lines 10-18), to its ironization in subsequent recontextualisations as partial, interested and/or defective.

The personal trouble that was(n't)

Let us start by examining how the classroom events that precipitated Coates' public intervention were staged (Extract 1, lines 1-9). Of immediate interest here are the person references 'Jennifer Coates' (line 1) and 'Professor Coates' (line 2). Both make sense as third-party person references. But they are not equivalent. Each brings its own locally specific contingencies and consequences. 'Jennifer Coates', for instance, is a standard way of doing reference to someone whilst attempting to convey that nothing special is intended (Jackson, 2011: 33). She is "just" a woman with a name. But Professor Coates is a 'marked' reference (Enfield, 2007: 97), readable in this context as inviting recipients to inspect the talk for *what else* is being done in addition to reference. So 'why that now?' (Schegloff, 1996: 439). Because it marks an aspect to Coates' identity that WMRM wants to show-off to readers as having been available to students. As compared with gender or age-based categorial incumbencies, a Professorship is not immediately glance-available. In that it is an essentially 'revelatory matter' (Jayyusi, 1984: 68), Extract 1 makes clear that "revelatory work" took place in the classroom. That she was '*formally*' (line 2) introduced – as opposed to "just" introduced – acts cataphorically, cueing us to receive her later on line 2 as more than 'Jennifer Coates'. Her formal introduction is as marked and extra-ordinary for us as it was – or *should have been* – for students. To show us this is to show us that a simple misunderstanding cannot adequately account for the way pupils quickly relabelled a Professor as a Miss. Also significant here is the way a third-party with the status of a 'headteacher' (line 3) presents Coates not just via the categorial title 'Professor' but via actions (lines 3-6) that a person to whom that term is legitimately to be applied should be seen to be doing (Jayyusi, 1984: 73). In this way both the visibility *and* the objectivity of her marked status to and for students is established. For a 'headteacher' is not just *any* type of person. As a category, it is conventionally heard to impute to its incumbents certain areas of expertise (Widdicombe, 1998: 52-53). It is, for instance, readably expectable for a headteacher's 'status-based authority' (Enfield, 2011: 300) to encompass her/his school and the rights to assess the authenticity of those entering into that school. The headteacher's introduction thus helps to externalise Coates's Professorial status: rather than appearing as the (possibly) idiosyncratic claim of a vain/deluded woman, it becomes readable as 'a widely

recognised (and hence objective) state of affairs' (Woolgar, 1988: 75). Again, this invites us to find it as difficult as pupils *should* have found it to approach Coates as anything but a Professor.

Her third-party introduction serves another purpose here too. Coates's status is a difficult phenomenon to manage. On the one hand it *has* to be referenced: in the absence of any discussion of how and when her status was made relevant, her relabelling would appear far less like a sociological puzzle. On the other hand to include your own status as a constituent element within a story risks exposing that story's 'subject-side'; that is, the possible biases and motivations that might have driven you to construct that particular version of events (Edwards, 2005). Self-praise (or any attempt to publicly invoke a social hierarchy whilst locating one's own elevated position therein) is a difficult interactional phenomenon to pull-off (Attenborough, 2011). As competent social members, we tend not to assume entitlement to make such claims because we know that our words may become accountable to others as 'overly subjective, biased and invested' (Speer, 2012: 56). In that 'status' is so readily understandable as involving personal claims to social esteem, Coates's story *could* have ended up revealing more about the narrating-*subject* (Coates and her ego) than about the narrated-*object* (the classroom interaction). So the fact that a 'headteacher' introduces Coates is far from an irrelevant detail: as the introduction's principal, author and animator, this character establishes epistemic distance between Coates and the public announcement of her status (Goffman, 1979).

Logically we also know that it must have been Coates who experienced Extract 1's reported events before recounting them to a journalist. An obvious way to represent those experiences, then, would have been via direct speech (e.g. "When I began volunteering..." etc.). Narrative control – and by implication epistemic access – would in this way have been ceded to Coates. But with the exception of lines 2-3's indirect speech with a reporting clause ('the headteacher told them...'), lines 1-6 have a free indirect mode of representation. This blurs the focus such that it is difficult to distinguish whether the experiences recounted are attributable to Coates or the journalist (Simpson, 2006: 82). Epistemic access appears as if shared: in that the journalist appears as an intra-diegetic narrator on the same narrative level as the story, we get to see what happened not just through Coates' own potentially biased eyes but also through those of someone with no obvious stake in the telling of the story (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005: 95).

Finally, consider how Extract 1 constructs the un-expectable – and by implication "*sociologically curious*" – nature of the student's behaviour. The imprecision of the

headteacher's free indirect speech allows only for those status-based details necessary to the presentation of this classroom incident as *more-than-just-a-classroom-incident* to appear (lines 2-6). During the presentation of Coates's labelling (line 7) and relabelling (lines 8-9), however, it is the precision afforded by direct speech that performs that same function: simple misunderstandings or mishearings are rendered less plausible as explanations for what happened precisely because we get to know exactly what was said. This leaves us with few places to go but sociological if we want to find a solution to the puzzle of Coates's relabelling. Note also that across most of this section (lines 5-12), story and text-time are almost identical (O'Toolan, 2001: 48): the pace of telling is such that both free-indirect and direct details of what was said would have taken almost as long to say as they now take to read. Crucially though, the way the full-stop separating '...with the students' from 'A girl put up her hand' (line 8) momentarily allows story-time to become longer than text-time. This aids in the channelling – or 'captation' (Latour, 1987) – of recipients. It creates an 'ellipsis'; a point at which no text space is spent on a piece of story duration (Bal, 2009: 101). Logically, we know that if a girl feels it necessary to 'put up her hand' and ask for help, various other events (tasks being introduced, guidelines being set, materials being studied, etc.) must have happened after the headteacher left the room (lines 7-8). But none are reported. In that the switch from Professor to Miss now appears virtually instantaneous, another simple explanation for what happened – i.e. that students simply *forgot* her "proper" name – is rendered less plausible.

In Extract 1 the readability of what happened as *potentially* symptomatic of wider public issues hinged on the availability – for us and for students – of Coates' Professorial status. In subsequent recontextualisations, however, Coates's Professorial identity either disappears from sight or is made to appear questionable. In Extract 2, for instance, we can see how this affects our ability to understand Coates as sociologically imaginative.

Extract 2 *Metro* (May 14, 2014)

1. When Jennifer Coates was first introduced at the school where she'd be
2. volunteering, she was shocked that pupils referred to her as 'Miss'. After all,
3. she's the emeritus Professor of English Language and Linguistics at Roehampton
4. University, and she expected to be addressed accordingly.

To be sure, as in Extract 1 we learn that she was 'introduced' to students (line 1). But we get no details as to the identity (or the footing) of the person giving that introduction. Not only

does this delete any sense that a relabelling took place. It provides for a reading whereby Coates's status as "Professor" was *never mentioned or made visible to the students at all*. Consider the third-party person reference 'Jennifer Coates' (line 1). It is precisely its *lack* of inferential loading that makes the categorisation so inferentially rich (cf. Stivers et al., 2007: 4). Of course, in Extract 1 Coates was also initially described as 'Jennifer Coates' (line 1). But these two ostensibly identical referential strategies do not, in and as part of these separate Extracts, have the same procedural consequentiality. Extract 1's reference to 'Jennifer Coates' was followed by a passage that showed Coates getting presented as a Professor (lines 2-6). To see her presented as an incumbent of that glance un-available category was to preempt any suggestion that students could have missed that aspect to her identity. Extract 2, however, provides no direct representation of her introduction. Across lines 2-4 all that follows 'Jennifer Coates' is something that reads as if Coates's own 'shocked' (line 2) retrospective *opinion* about that introduction: although the passage has a heterodiegetic, third-person narrative form its smooth transposition into the homodiegetic first-person form ("I'm the Emeritus..."), along with its inclusion of informal, idiomatic expressions ("after all"), suggests how strongly the voice on offer is that of Coates herself (Simpson, 2014: 29). And in the absence of any other textual information about that introduction, we may read 'Jennifer Coates' as an accurate description of how she was introduced, and how she became visually available to students. Showing us 'Jennifer Coates' foregrounds the invisibility of her Professorial status; its lack of glance-availability. It focalises Coates as students in a classroom would almost certainly have focalised her: as just a(nother) woman and just a(nother) Miss (cf. Land and Kitzinger 2007, 498). But if the pupils' actions in labelling as Miss a woman introduced to them in a classroom as 'Jennifer Coates' now seem entirely expectable, what of Coates's own actions? Extract 1 took care to present her personality as anything but a resource for explaining (away) her interest in this incident. In Extract 2, however, Coates's fixation with status renders her epistemic access to events readably questionable. The pupils, the journalist and – via the journalist – us, as recipients, get to see her as she really was: glance-available as a woman called "Jennifer Coates". It is only Coates who now seems to think she radiates a Professorial aura so powerful that even her mere presence in a room should be enough to alert anyone, young or old, to her greatness: it is the sentential adverb "after all" (line 2) that enacts the casual confidence with which Extract 2's Coates assumes her status as 'available for the looking' (Jayyusi, 1984: 68-73). In that it does, a comical 'reality disjuncture' is created between us and her (Pollner, 1974).

By itself, one instance of Coates's Professorial identity getting deleted would not be significant, principally because a series of newspaper articles will usually be varied. But this type of recontextualisation appeared throughout the data set. Consider Extract 3.

Extract 3 *Mail Online* (May 18, 2014)

1. When introduced to pupils as 'Professor', she may not have
2. expected them to appreciate her academic achievements – but
3. she did expect them to address her accordingly. Instead, Jennifer
4. Coates says she was 'demeaned' by the youngsters simply calling her
5. 'Miss'.

Being introduced to students “as” a Professor (line 1) is not the same as being a Professor who gets introduced to pupils. Only the former orients-to this aspect of a person's identity as revelatory. But if Extract 3 acknowledges that Coates's identity needed explaining, it does little to establish how this was achieved. Consider the quote marks around “Professor” (line 1). They allow for various readable interpretations. First, they might indicate a stretch of direct speech; an acknowledgement that someone, at some point, uttered that word whilst introducing Coates. In the absence of other details, “Professor” – precisely because a detail apparently so crucial is allowed to appear as direct-speech – could be taken to represent all that was said; a passing remark, easily missed or misheard, before the class was handed over to ‘Jennifer Coates’ (lines 3-4). Certainly, the possibility of pupils either having forgotten or misunderstood the word Professor – which now, of course, appears in isolation and without explanation – is enhanced by their infantilization from ‘students’ to ‘pupils’ (line 1) and ‘youngsters’ (line 4). Second, though, Professor might just as easily be taken to indicate scare-quotes; that is, features that imply ‘a distance between the writer of the text and the words being quoted, and some element of disapproval’ (Jefferies, 2010: 140). They might suggest the out-of-place-ness of Professor in this particular locale; the journalist's opinion that a Professor's category entitlement is coterminous with the boundaries of the academy (Watson, 1976: 69). Or, alternatively, they might suggest “Professor” as a term of ‘estrangement’ (Fowler, 1996 in Simpson 2014, 133); a way for the journalist to signal his/her unease as to the legitimacy of Coates' claims to incumbency of that category.

The point in identifying these various readable interpretations is not to suggest that they exhaust our interpretive options. It is simply to note that they are there. Extract 1 made it difficult to wander from a story in which an issue was slowly being extracted from a trouble. Extract 3, on the other hand, provides various inferential pathways for us to find, follow, and

in following suspect that the story might involve nothing more than a woman caught up in her own troubles. It is worth noting, though, that Extract 4 actively foregrounds the possibility of Coates having claimed a status she had no *legitimate* right to claim.

Extract 4 *Telegraph Online* (May 14, 2014)

1. Jennifer Coates, a teacher at a girls school in East Dulwich finds it
2. demeaning for her pupils to call her “miss”. She prefers the title
3. “Professor”.

Whereas Extract 1 pre-empted readings of Coates as status-obsessed, Extract 4 gives us someone whose status claims were built from a ‘preference’ (line 3) not “actual credentials”. The latter would have been readably bad enough given its suggestion of self-praise/adulation. But the former is catastrophic for Coates’s readability as a sociologically imaginative thinker. It is Coates’s re-categorisation from academic to ‘teacher’ (line 1) that changes entirely the rights she can be expected to claim (Watson, 2009: 45). “Teachers at girls schools” certainly may have, but in the absence of any further information are not easily readable as having, entitlement to use the title Professor. It is difficult, therefore, to connect the action of “preferring” the title Professor to the category ‘teacher’ without finding the action in some way odd or inappropriate. Indeed in a context where her status as a teacher appears without scare-quotes, “Professor” (line 3) modalises her claim to that status. The scare-quotes suggest that her “preference” for this title – her mere whim or fancy – is all that she has: reality (teacher) is thus differentiated from fantasy (“Professor”). In that her preference for this title does not follow from her incumbency of the category “teacher”, a category puzzle is first created...and then quickly resolved via our ability to make inferences as to the “deluded” or “vain” type of teacher that might harbour such a preference. Hierarchically re-ordering the category ‘teacher’ into its moral types in this way allows for Coates to *both* be a teacher *and* to have such preferences (see Wowk, 1984). And whether we do or do not then go on to infer other candidate activities for a “deluded” (or whatever) type of ‘teacher’ to perform, Coates’s sociological imagination is already all but lost. In any description of a person, there will tend to be an ‘implicative fit’ between descriptive items such that they appear normatively and conventionally consistent with one another (Jayyusi, 1984: 101). To know that Coates is a vain teacher is already to have deleted just about any possibility of her also, and at the same time, coming to seem capable of “extracting a public issue from an ostensibly personal trouble”.

The (flawed) discovery of an issue in a trouble

There are some interesting parallels between the strategies at work in this data-set as journalists reported Coates's discovery of an issue-in-a-trouble, and the ways scientists present their claims to have discovered a phenomenon out-there-in-the-world. Claims to scientific discovery exhibit an 'interesting awkwardness' (Woolgar, 1988: 101). Scientists have to be involved in making such claims. But they also have to appear un-involved, minimising the possibility of "the discovery" appearing as if the product of *their* manipulation, *their* fabrication, *their* fraud (etc.). The writing style we intuitively recognise as "scientific" is an attempt to minimise that awkwardness: scientists appear merely to be authoring claims for which the out-there data stands as principal (Latour, 1987). For Coates's discovery to publicly come-off right she too needed to appear *involved-but-not-too-involved*; that is, led by data rather than pre-packaged personal/theoretical biases and pre-dispositions. Across the data-set, however, such 'awkwardness' was not always minimised. WMRM and its recontextualisations both oriented-to this style of discovery-presentation. But WMRM did so to reify Coates's discovery as solid and literal, whilst recontextualisations did so to ironize her attempted discovery as partial, interested and/or in some way defective.

Let us start with WMRM. Coates's 'extreme surprise' (Extract 1, line 10) is an anaphoric reference to its localised and highly specific object: the way a pupil relabeled her as "Miss". But as we move through the text this object is re-formulated to index something beyond itself: an 'awful disparity' (line 11); an 'example' (line 13), and then later, in the journalist's words, a 'discrepancy' (line 15). Each successive formulation provides a means for demonstrating the evidential – rather than "personal" – basis of and for Coates's 'surprise'. The trick here is the way these words/phrases switch register, from a recognizably mundane descriptive world to one in which statistical/social scientific terminology are involved. This matters for a number of reasons. First, because statistical terms and concepts are readably *docile, a-theoretical and disinterested* (see Rose, 1999). They allow for the creation of a domain in which 'technical expertise can appear to dominate political [or, we might add, personal] debate' (Hopwood, 1988: 263). To build a discovery-claim on the basis of examples of discrepancies and disparities is to avoid any reference to local and potentially subjective feelings on the one hand, and global and potentially motivated theoretical frameworks on the other. This effect is heightened in other ways. The action description 'noted' (line 15) provides for a very different reading of how the 'discrepancy' emerged than, say, "suspected". To suspect implies prior-knowledge; a motivation for visiting certain

locations at certain times. ‘Noting’ implies naivety; an act of looking-up from an intended activity to see something unexpected. Similarly, the basic narrative structure of the sentence beginning line 11 is a version of the formulation ‘at first I thought [x], but then I realised [y]’ (i.e. “at first I didn’t think [*that there was this awful disparity*] but then I realised that [*these young teachers are all Sir and I’m not*]”). It purifies Coates’s discovery-claim, freeing it of subjective obstacles. To report that she did not think there would be an ‘awful disparity’ (lines 11) is to pre-empt any suggestion that she had a (theoretical) axe to grind, knew what she wanted to find and was going to find it come what may. Similarly, to suggest that she only realised her error after experiencing a classroom first-hand, is to make clear that it was not motivated theoretical dispositions, but *the data available to her in that classroom* that precipitated the realisation (cf. Sacks, 1984).

So these words matter. They background subjective phenomena capable of rendering Coates’s discovery as readably flawed. But they matter for a second reason too: they allow for a *de-differentiation* of Coates’s experiences (cf. Timmermans, Bowker and Star, 1998: 203). To describe something as an impertinence or a discourtesy would be to locate that something as a private matter. Evidence of and for “it” would derive largely from subjective feelings. To describe something as an ‘example’ of an ‘awful disparity’/‘discrepancy’ is, on the other hand, to discover that something as a publicly observable-and-reportable thing: something that happened to you has not just happened to you; in that it has happened to many others too, evidence of and for “it” resides not in your feelings, but in the many other instances of it out-there-in-the-world. Consider, for instance, the emotion word ‘depressing’ (line 13). It takes as its object an “it” which represents a personal trouble. But this “it” is quickly reformulated as an ‘example’ (line 13). Coates’s seemingly isolated “it” is thus transformed into one amongst many contextually specific examples of “it”, where the unifying factor, identifiable in all, is a particular public issue: how language-use (re)produces women’s lower status vis-à-vis men. Even the present-participle form ‘depressing’ helps to present a Sensor turned outwards towards the world (“it is depressing”) rather than inwards (cf. the past-participle form “I am depressed”). As a result, the classroom incident is no longer a ‘one-off’ but a ‘classifiable event’ (Hopwood, 1988: 261). Subjective specificities have been stripped away to reveal an important set of objective generalities. Unlike “feelings”, that cannot be transported to other locales and found, therein, in exactly the same form, ‘examples’, ‘discrepancies’ and ‘disparities’ are usefully ‘immutable mobiles’ (Latour, 1987). Describable and knowable in the same way and as the same type of phenomenon in any given context, they are transportable and can thus be used to establish ‘bonds of

uniformity’ (Cline-Cohen, 1982: 43) between sites that might otherwise, at the level of individual feelings, appear different.

In recontextualisations of WMRM, however, evidence of and for Coates’s discovery appeared less immutably mobile than *mutably immobile: mutable* because tied to Coates’s emotional state at that moment in that classroom; and thus *immobile* because irrelevant to any site beyond those in which Coates’s personal feelings are at stake. Consider Extract 5.

Extract 5 *The People* (May 18 2014)

1. She said she was introduced to teenage pupils at a nearby
2. academy, where she was volunteering as “Professor Coates”.
3. But they soon began calling her “Miss” – which made her
4. feel “demeaned”. It was, she maintained, a “depressing”
5. example of how women are given low status while men
6. acquire high status.

The suggestion that students ‘made her feel demeaned’ (lines 3-4) is interesting for its use of the past-participle ‘demeaned’. It appears throughout the data-set, and always as if something Coates had uttered in and as part of WMRM. But the word does not appear in WMRM. Neither the journalist-narrator nor anyone quoted therein uses the word. So the fairest thing to be written about it here is that it might – “might” – constitute an attempt to reformulate Extract 1’s ‘it is a depressing example of...’ (line 13). But if it is such a thing then it is not particularly helpful to and for the readability of Coates’s discovery-claim as free from personal biases/motivations. To be demeaned is to be lowered in dignity, honour or standing; to feel that one has been debased in the eyes of others (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In that this word – Coates’s supposed word – can be understood in such a way, it presents us with a woman who focalised what happened from a personalised and embittered standpoint. There is nothing here to suggest a *docile* or *disinterested descriptive* register. Coates’s first reaction to events appears not to have been to ‘think herself away’ from that personal milieu (cf. Mills, 1959) but to “feel herself into it”. Almost immediately, in the space claimed by line 3’s dash, we see her starting to link what happened to her own unique sense of having been “lowered in dignity”. Whereas present-participle emotion words like Extract 1’s ‘depressing’ take intentional objects that are material, ongoing and thus potentially still out-there-in-the-world, past-participle forms like ‘demeaned’ almost always take objects that have been felt or sensed. Demeaned thus locates all of the hurt and wounding in Coates as an individual. And this hurt and wounded woman is, of course, the woman who then goes on to claim the

discovery of a public issue – women’s lower social status vis-à-vis men – in her own personal trouble. It is not difficult to read this and to start to suspect that her initial reaction might well have led to the production of a highly motivated and self-interested claim. In the absence of any reference to WMRM’s tale of her curiously immediate re-labelling – from Professor to Miss – there is little here but personal feelings to stand as an evidential basis for her claim. That she is subsequently shown ‘maintaining’ (line 4) her stance, suggests an action being done “despite” or “in the face of” available evidence.

The fact that she appears to have ‘felt’ (line 4) demeaned also serves to differentiate Coates’ experiences, locating what happened as entirely personal to her. Unlike Extract 1’s relational-process-action (‘it [Carrier] is a depressing example [Quality]’) in which both Carrier and Quality had their provenance in the external world, Extract 5’s mental-process-action of “feeling” inhabits and reflects the internal world of Coates’s consciousness. Evidence of and for the demeaning can thus only derive from her as an individual. Subjective specificities are not so much being stripped away as added in. Note also that Extract 1’s ‘depressing example’ (line 3) – which appeared as direct speech – is subtly altered. “Depressing” still appears as direct speech, but ‘example’ is given as if a journalist’s gloss on what she may – *or of course may not* – have gone on to say. To present Coates as principal solely to the word “depressing” allows for this feeling to become readably separable from an intentional object – i.e. an example – that resides out-there-in-the-world. And in the absence of any definitive sense that Coates thought of what happened as an “example”, there is no reason for us to assume that she did. In fact because we already know that, *initially* – in the first moments of shock following her treatment – she ‘felt’ demeaned, it is possible to read ‘depressing’ (line 4) as a retrospective upgrade on the type of feeling generated by that treatment (e.g. “It made me feel demeaned...and that was depressing”). This moves us a long way from Extract 1’s ‘disparities’ and ‘discrepancies’. It becomes difficult to understand how Coates can justify her claim to have established ‘bonds of uniformity’ between her experiences and those of others elsewhere. All she appears to have by way of evidence are her own feelings of having been ‘demeaned’ and having found that experience ‘depressing’.

Across these recontextualisations we frequently encounter Coates not in the guise of Extract 1’s ‘noticer’ (line 15), but as someone who had gone out looking for feminist and/or politically correct trouble. Extract 6 is the headline to one such recontextualisation.

Extract 6 *The People* (May 18, 2014)

1. A Right Old Miss: Expel Potty PC Profs from our classrooms

In that it has no Subject element, the second part of this statement takes the grammatical mood of an imperative (Simpson, 2014: 13). This is a common journalistic device for appealing to a ‘universal audience’: in that no-one is addressed, every-one is a potential addressee; that is, the type of person who should and would want to perform an act of expulsion from what are now, naturally, “our” classrooms (cf. Billig, 1995: 89). The way the verb ‘expel’ retains its base form and is not marked for tense also suggests that ‘Potty PC Profs’ are an ongoing problem beyond this particular story: there has been, is, and will continue to be a need for “us” to expel such people from “our” classrooms. But who are these people? Although a category like “Potty PC Profs” is not a once-and-for-all supra-contextual phenomenon it is, nonetheless, conventionally readable as a ‘snarl word’ (Talbot, 2007: 759); a means for categorising people who are known to over-politicise issues that are outside the sphere of conventional politics. To categorise Coates and her ‘Potty Prof’ colleagues under this umbrella heading usefully anonymises them. Rather than “*individual subjects*” – with names, biographies, particular research interests, nuanced and varied analytic perspectives (etc.) – we get “*categorical objects*”; that is, representatives of political correctness (Eglin and Hester, 2003: 55). Irrespective of their names, biographies and so on we now know the only relevant thing about them here, which is that they went into the classroom carrying political biases that could not but affect their ability to judge events impartially and objectively. In that the article’s headline provides these instructions for reading, the rest of the article is but the puzzle to a solution already proposed (Woolgar, 1988: 75).

Even in recontextualisations where Coates and her colleagues appear to be working inductively, moving from localised data to wider arguments about that data’s significance, their arguments appear flawed and the data past its sell-by-date. This can be seen most clearly in Extract 7.

Extract 7 *Daily Telegraph* (May 15, 2014)

1. Experts have pronounced that use of the words “Sir” and “Miss”
2. in classrooms is out of date and “embodies the massive status
3. disparity and sexism of previous years”. By “previous years”, they
4. mean the 19th century, when the female teaching profession was
5. dominated by frustrated spinsters. Ergo, continued use of “Miss”,
6. says Prof Jennifer Coates of Roehampton University, is “a depressing
7. example of how women are given low status and men...are given
8. high status...Sir is a Knight. There weren’t women knights, but ‘Miss’
9. is ridiculous: it doesn’t match ‘Sir’ at all. It’s just one of the names you
10. can call an unmarried woman.”

In the parlance of speech act theory, to ‘pronounce’ (line 1) is to attempt a performative utterance; that is, a description of a state of affairs that is also, and at the same time, an attempt to effect that state of affairs. But as Austin (1975: 14) notes, the difficulty with attempting such a thing is that ‘besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go off right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action’. A pronouncement that two people are now husband and wife, for instance, only takes on illocutionary force when uttered by a certain type of person (a vicar) in certain circumstances (standing in front of a bride and groom) and in a certain type of location (a church). So what might it take for recipients to hear Extract 7’s expert pronouncement as having ‘gone off right’? Certainly what Extract 7 *itself* makes accountable as the answer to that question is an evidential base that takes the form of an enthymeme (lines 3-8). In textbook terms, an enthymeme is an abbreviated syllogism: where the latter involves two initial, usually interlocking premises that lead to a conclusion, the former omits one of the initial premises. The aim of this omission – again in textbook terms – is the rhetorical one of drawing author and audience into the same orbit such that the latter ends up producing the missing premise on behalf of the former (Gill and Whedbee, 1997: 171). But this ideal-type account assumes that an enthymeme’s author, animator and principal all coalesce in the same person, and that, as a result, that person has a stake in making *their* enthymeme work for *their* purposes. In Extract 7 the principal stands either as the ‘expert’ collective (shown pronouncing via direct (lines 2-3) and indirect (lines 1-2) speech representation) or Coates as a representative expert (where the reporting clause on line 6 turns the first half of the sentence into a free indirect representation of her words before the second half presents what are now her utterances directly). Interestingly too, Coates’s apparent utterance, ‘ergo’ (line 5), offers up a form of cognitive enactment: it shows us the process of working-through – of logical argumentative deduction – taking place as these experts build

from data to pronouncement. The animator and author of the enthymeme, however, is a journalist. And this journalist allows for the enthymeme to function such that it cannot but fail to draw the audience into alignment with the reasoning – the ‘ergo’ type steps – of the ‘experts’. The sentence beginning line 1 provides our first premise, whilst the sentence beginning line 5 presents the enthymeme’s conclusion. In-between a sentence provides instructions for unpacking the initial premise: for these experts, it seems, “previous years” means the 19th century ‘when the teaching profession was dominated by frustrated spinsters’ (lines 4-5). We are now well placed to find the missing second premise, and to do so ostensibly on Coates’s behalf. It can only be something like: “Nothing has changed since the 19th century and schools are still dominated by frustrated spinsters”. This is important. For an audience to be persuaded ‘they must assume the...premise’. If they do not then ‘they will reject the argument as incoherent’ (ibid., 171). To find this premise is to remain entirely unpersuaded. In the absence of the classroom episode, and everything that WMRM allowed to flow from it, the expert’s pronouncement cannot but fail to ‘go off properly’. In that things have *quite obviously* changed since the 19th century we are invited to see incoherence. Their ‘ergo’ type steps are palpably illogical. Crucial, though, to our ability to read this report of failure as “plausible” (rather than “an exaggeration”) is the way the article from which Extract 9 is drawn cues us to understand that in finding “failure” we are not doing these “experts” any kind of disservice. Immediately prior to Extract 7’s flawed enthymeme the following information appears.

Extract 8 *Daily Telegraph* (May 15, 2014)

1. Whenever we’re asked to stop smoking in the swimming pool or
2. reading *Razzle* at work, we call it “political correctness gone mad”.
3. But, I wonder, do the mad ever go politically correct? Is there a
4. disorder by which a lunatic (sorry “intellectually distracted
5. personage”) decides that all gender differences are invented
6. fascisms? Perhaps they hang around maternity wards trying to induce
7. labour in mind. Or go through copies of *The Sun* with a marker pen
8. drawing jackets and ties on the Page 3 models.
9. More likely they go into academia.

This is of course a readably tongue-in-cheek “psychological profiling” of a certain type of person; a person likely to ‘go into academia’ (line 9). It performs ridicule but only where that performance has an alibi of irony firmly in place. But even if this profiling is not serious enough to be taken completely seriously, it is serious enough to be taken *inferentially*.

Beyond the tongue-in-cheek jokiness, the journalist is cueing us to see what unites these ‘lunatics’ (line 4) and their disparate set of actions (lines 3-8): an obsession with pre-determined PC theories that are incapable of hooking onto the world out-there. In that Extract 7’s ‘experts’ are readably the same as Extract 8’s ‘lunatics’ we find an explanation as to why such weak data led to something as strong as a “pronouncement”. Their dogmatic belief in pre-determined PC theories meant that their interest in data was only ever likely to have been as marginal here as we know it has been in the past. In these ways, unobtrusively and without fanfare, a sociological imagination is deconstructed: an enthymeme that might otherwise have appeared just a bit *too* flawed for us to fully trust the journalist’s apparently objective rendering of it, ends up appearing exactly as flawed as we would expect given the characteristics of its ‘expert’ authors.

For a public (and recontextualised) sociology?

This article explored the interrelationships and tensions between public engagement (in general), public sociology (in particular) and media discourse. Across two interrelated analytic sections, a comparison was pursued between WMRM – an article in which the arguments, opinions and thoughts of a group of academics first appeared – and its subsequent mediated recontextualisations. In various ways, and with varying degrees of subtlety, those initial arguments, opinions and thoughts were re-constructed so as to appear readably *flawed*, *biased* and *embittered*. A sociologically imaginative working through of the public issues structuring a personal trouble was transformed into a sociologically pointless public projection of personal angst. In this conclusion I want to establish some links between this localised case-study of public sociology in action, and the wider social-interactional and linguistic challenges facing scholars participating in mediated public engagement activities.

For Burawoy (2005) as for Mills (1959), public sociology involves not just an ability to connect seemingly *personal troubles* to the wider *public issues* shaping and structuring them. It is about finding ways to do so that can capture, engage and involve audiences beyond the academy. The former, as we all know from our weighty back catalogue of critical peer-review comments – is not that easy; but as this article suggests, in a mediated society it is still much easier than the latter. Social scientists, in their publicly available texts and utterances will always seek to evidence the ability to think themselves away from the local and the personal (Mills, 1959). But to think yourself away is also – *and at the same time* – to communicate to others that you have, indeed, thought yourself away. In a context where universities are increasingly incentivising public engagement activities (either directly or

indirectly via the valorisation of “impact” work), the problem for social scientists is that to communicate with large non-academic audiences is – at least in part – to communicate in and through the media. This need not *always* be a problem (see Boynton, 2013; Downey, 2017). But flash-points undoubtedly arise whenever academics are forced to communicate indirectly with general audiences via intermediaries like journalists. Put bluntly, academics have a ‘stake’ in producing sociologically imaginative work; intermediaries need not.

Is it likely, then, that recontextualisations of the kind seen here will be discoverable in other, locally specific instances of public engagement? If we take seriously this idea of “local specificity”, then yes. For whilst the anti-feminist/PC tropes on display in recontextualisations of WMRM will be wearily familiar to feminist scholars, this familiarity should not blind us to their contextual *functionality* – or what discursive psychologists would term their ‘action orientation’ (see Attenborough, 2011). As depressing/irritating as they undoubtedly are, they represent little more than locally specific means to the ultimate end of rubbishing a particular form of public sociology. After all, the act of being anti-feminist, anti-foreigner, anti-intellectual, anti-political-correctness, anti-research-that-doesn’t-fit-with-your-pre-existing-beliefs or whatever is very rarely performed “just for the sake of it”. Any such performance is bound up, however inchoately, with a belief that the performance will expose as ludicrous some other’s claim to have transformed an apparently private trouble into a visibly public issue: these academics do not speak for “women” – *they are just embittered, bra-burning old hags with various misandrist axes to grind*; these blacks do not speak for an “oppressed minority” – *they are just feckless thugs who cannot accept that they alone bear responsibility for their own poverty*; these right-wing politicians do not speak for “the silent majority” – *they are just whipping up hatred of foreigners in order to satiate their lust for political power*; and so on. In each case, one group’s sociological imagination is recontextualised as another group’s psychological delusion. It therefore stands as an interesting and timely empirical question as to whether and how those academics whom the media would destroy – e.g. feminists, socialists, environmentalists, conservative thinkers – they first make authors of public sociology with little or no sociological value.

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