

Personal experiences bringing altmetrics to the academic market

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Altmetric

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In late 2014 Altmetric released a platform (we call it the Explorer for Institutions) which allows institutions, academic or otherwise, to monitor, evaluate and take into account the online attention around scholarly materials which had been aggregating ever since the web became more of a socially-nuanced network than a simple series of websites. Attention has been collecting via social networks, blogs, within the stories on major (and minor) news sites, on *Wikipedia*, in policy sources (often as citations buried in thousands of PDFs) and even on deliberately academy-focused websites like *PubPeer*, *Publons* and *Faculty of 1000*. This attention has been accelerating as the world's scholars, journalists and the general public become more involved in the "great conversation" online around the fruits of research. The Altmetric Explorer helped bring all these disparate forms of attention together, not just on an article level, but on an author and institutional level too.

Since Altmetric decided to track this attention for everything which features a scholarly identifier from the very outset, our clients could effectively go back in time after implementing our system and see prior attention to items as far back as the beginning of 2012. Some clients found upon building their institutional profile that they had missed out on capitalising on huge online positive responses to certain publications, and had singularly failed to respond to legitimate negative feedback online for other research outputs. This was a self-evident area needing improvement, a place for communications, PR and media relations to bolster and reinforce its operations, and having access to this information has

enabled changes to the engagement habits of these institutions in this brief interim.

Providing evidence of societal impact

I contend that the monitoring and measuring of engagement, re-use and commentary which collects around scholarly materials online is valuable for its own sake. These millions of interactions constitute important data around the impact and attention which research receives. They deserve to be factored into evaluations of institutional missions, help benchmark press and media success more meaningfully than mere downloads or page views can be expected to, and can also provide clear evidence of "societal impact" which is now required by many funding bodies around the world including *Horizon 2020* and the USA's *National Science Foundation*. Since I began working with libraries and companies in 2004, far and away the number one complaint I have heard from customers is regarding budget cuts imposed by institutions, company boards and governments. Surely Altmetric cannot be anything but a help to making a clear case for relevant, impactful and important research funding which should be defended vigorously, backed up by auditable data and real evidence of online engagement.

The reactions to this new arena of "altmetrics" have been both positive and negative, and for telling reasons in both sides. On the positive side of the balance sheet, authors, small institutions and less established voices in research have embraced the ability to gain an overview of the public data which collects around their

works. Simply look at Altmetric's own Twitter account mentions to witness the number of authors thanking us for discovering huge news stories which mentioned their items, but which are not easily manually found; news organisations are not in the habit of exercising formal citation standards, and often mention the "*May 19 issue of Cell*" and a paper's co-author perhaps.

And yet clever data mining organised by the Altmetric team finds this needle of coverage in the internet's haystack; this offers the author an opportunity for real credit, another plank in their never-ending arguments for funding. Since each of our over 7 million details pages are freely available online for everything we track, we have handed authors and other interested parties real value about their research coverage. This openness places our efforts within the Open Data sphere as much as possible, while still operating as a business which was built to do the spadework and development required to avail the world of these data.

Institutions which already had a dim sense that there was an awful lot of discussion out there, discussion which is plainly invisible to bibliometricians who focus purely on academic citations, adopted Altmetric for Institutions at a speed I have not witnessed elsewhere in my 12 years in academic sales. Ask any of my clients, and they'll tell you I am not the pushy sort, either. These institutions understood instantly the benefits of these data, and were willing to develop some of their own use cases as well. They have been outstanding defenders of the broadening of the scope of attention tracking. Because Altmetric offers big data and an API, our clients have been as much

the innovators behind new systems as our own agile development team.

But altmetrics as a field has met its fair few critics too, and I choose to outline these criticisms which I have come across at the close of this piece precisely because we can learn the most on the use and abuse of altmetrics from some of these attitudes.

High scores as an invitation for scrutiny

For one, there is a long-standing assumption that high attention scores in Altmetric correlate with or entail high quality. This is as untrue of Altmetric scores as it is of traditional citations (which is still by and large considered an indicator of academic success.) And yet some of the highest cited items are cited precisely for their ineptitude or flaws. Just as high citation counts do not automatically deliver praise to Andrew Wakefield's fraudulent and now retracted MMR/Autism article in the *Lancet* many years ago [1], so a high Altmetric score only invites careful scrutiny of the actual coverage itself to gauge the nature of the attention and the impact of a particular article, and not an automatic endorsement.

Another criticism is the great worry of "gaming" metrics; essentially the claim goes that manipulation can inflate a score. While the point above on high scores not equating necessarily to good scores still answers some portion of this charge, two things are forgotten by those making this claim. For one, the sources Altmetric takes into account are hard to fabricate. Appearances in the online news media, policy PDFs from world-famous institutions such as the World Bank or the UK Government cannot be easily invented by researchers, and are some of the most compelling sources of attention outside of purely academic engagement. And secondly, it is much harder to game multiple metrics at once than to manipulate a single one – such as citations. One need only follow *RetractionWatch's* excellent blog [2] to witness the multiple stories of citation stacking, faked peer review and other forms of manipulation to realise that if gaming were a problem in multiple

metrics at once – such as Altmetric's multiple attention sources – it is an even more serious problem in just one metric – such as citations. Ultimately both citations and altmetrics are better off being evaluated together, providing a comprehensive, falsifiable and more complete picture of engagement.

There is a growing realisation now within research, either private or publicly funded, that relevance to society, or interest from society, is of vital importance for purposes of innovation and social development. At the same time, public literacy about research and science is a key factory in future funding, and in future recruitment of researchers from the general public. The steps I have seen taken by our brave and forward-thinking clients demonstrates a form of advocacy. An advocacy of a closer relationship between the academy and society, governments and industry.

On the research horizon, there should be as few conspicuous ivory towers as possible.

References

- [1] RETRACTED: Wakefield, AJ et al.: Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. *Lancet*, **1998**, 351, 637–641. DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(97)11096-0.
[2] <http://retractionwatch.com>



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