Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions

BASR

Post-lineage yoga: adventures in social media engagement

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Abstract

The positionality of the researcher has long been of debate. Within ethnographic research into cultural practices, a world of nuance arises in the possible relationships of researcher and researched. We are engaged in complex processes of reconciliation between the under-represented communities whose stories we aim to tell (Shaw 1999: 108; Orsi 2013: 5), and the power an academic position confers to "define reality for others" (Hufford 1999: 298). The resulting implications for the researcher are further complicated and enriched when public interest in our work is mediated in online environments. As scholars we are often ill-equipped to ride fast-moving flows of misinformation and meme, rumour and trolling.

Towards the end of my doctoral research, an academic term from my thesis became caught up in the increasingly heated spaces of yoga-related social media. In this article, I step back from the situation to share a snapshot of what happens when academics go viral, and to deconstruct the little-understood processes of subcultural evolution at work. I ask: what can we learn from these encounters about the nature of boundaries between scholar and practitioner, researcher and researched, professional and personal? And how might academic discourse and engagement evolve to meet the challenges of an online economy of knowledge?

Keywords

Yoga, social media, engagement

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Introduction

Towards the end of my doctorate, an academic term that I originated within my research into contemporary yoga communities began to be used in the affect-laden spaces of yoga-related social media. The rigours of academic research do not, on their own, adequately equip scholars for riding fast-moving currents of misinformation and meme, rumour and trolling. This is further illustrated when we attempt, as I do here, to write about trolling and its discursive context for peer review. Proper referencing of sources within social media newsfeeds is difficult at best. Data analysis is dependent on extensive context.

On March 10th, 2018, an image was shared in various yoga-related Facebook groups. The faces of myself and two other people had been inserted into an existing photo, showing us wearing robes commonly associated with the Hindu priesthood. The brand logo of Yoga Alliance (see 2019i), had been added, together with the caption: "Authentic neoliberal yoga at Yoga Alliance!"

Small numbers of social media activists claim that Yoga Alliance seeks to 'control' the teaching of yoga, and that its managing ethos is appropriative of Indian wisdom traditions (see 2019a). This critique spreads from the organisation, to its staff and any public figures associated with it. My colleagues in the remixed image were Carol Horton, a writer and scholar on contemporary yoga (Horton and Harvey, 2012), and Matthew Remski, who is

most well-known for investigating abusive power dynamics in yoga (Remski, 2019)[1]. In February 2018, we were among approximately one hundred scholars, teachers and activists who were asked by Yoga Alliance to give our opinions on proposed new teaching standards (see 2018).

Shortly before this image was posted, similar photos had been shared and widely condemned in yoga-related social media spaces. Those unaltered photos showed a white Sanskrit scholar in the robes of a Hindu priest, leading a Vedic ritual with his students (see Cole, 2017). It was unclear whether the scholar was conducting a classroom demonstration, or undertaking the ritual as a priest. I and the others included in the remixed image had no connection to the earlier event or the scholar involved. Yet the new image was an attempt to associate us with an event widely held to be appropriative of Indian culture. The image suggests that Yoga Alliance's consultants are not a collection of independent figures chosen for their diversity of thought, but an organised collective attempting to appropriate Indian culture to our combined commercial advantage. A research article could be written on this image alone. Yet a year later, much of the subcultural context that it references, and the numerous responses accreting to it, are lost in the data tide of social media.

Engaging with yoga subcultures through social media was not central to my data collection, but it was a significant aspect of understanding the wider cultural context. I manage a blog (see Wildcroft, 2019b), a research related mailing list (see Wildcroft, 2019a), and guest appearances on podcasts (see Asimos, 2018) in order to regularly 'reach' a few thousand yoga teachers worldwide, employing common social media strategies for scholars. Through this reach, I test theoretical concepts such as the label 'post-lineage yoga' with publics beyond my original research, and construct pathways to impact and engagement, employing the terminology of academic funding metrics.

The data I reference in this article is often autoethnographic, and ephemeral, yet the patterns of behaviour involved are clear. My positionality is unusual for a research journal, in discussing engagement outcomes rather than research outputs. I illuminate processes that are rarely addressed within scholarship, in order to ask: what can we learn from these encounters about the nature of interactions between scholar and practitioner, researcher and researched in the study of religion?

Post-lineage and the governance of yoga

My thesis centred on a specific community of yoga teachers in the UK (Wildcroft, 2018b). This yoga can be described as post-lineage in the same way that Linda Woodhead (1993) once described "post Christian" religious communities as engaging in direct, detailed responses to perceived issues

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[1] Both colleagues are aware of, and have given consent for, their inclusion in this article.

with the existing institutions of Christianity. Whilst individual practitioners may maintain close connections to their original teachers, post-lineage yoga is a re-evaluation of the authority to determine practice, and a privileging of peer networks over pedagogical hierarchies, or *saṃgha*s (communities) over *guru-śiṣya* (teacher-adept) relationships.

The processes that my thesis describes are part of an increasingly visible, transnational evolution, in reaction to both orthopraxic yoga lineages, and more recent neoliberal yoga brands. Like any similar academic endeavour, my work describes instead of justifies the phenomenon of post-lineage yoga. But from its inception, yoga teachers have experimented with 'post-lineage yoga' as a self-descriptor. It was first used publicly by J Brown (see 2017a, Brown, 2017b), discussed with David Lipsius of Yoga Alliance (see Lipsius and Wildcroft, 2018), and referenced by Peter Blackaby (2018), among numerous others.

Although the teaching of yoga is largely unregulated, there exists in many countries one or more bureaucratic organisations that cross lineage boundaries, and are diversely involved in creating common standards, ratifying training, and engaging with public policy structures on behalf of their members. In the UK, these include the British Wheel of Yoga (see 2015), Yoga Alliance Professionals (see 2019g)(no relation to Yoga Alliance) and the Independent Yoga Network (see 2019b). In North America and most of the world, the most prominent such organisation is Yoga Alliance. Founded in 1999 as "a voluntary registry to recognize yoga teachers and schools" whose training met internally agreed standards (2019h), in recent years the expectations of its members have greatly increased. Many now expect the organisation to police ethical transgressions among members, yet others are vehemently opposed to any such regulation.

Yoga Alliance is redrawing its standards for teaching yoga in order to address this conflict through extensive consultation, but some activists consider the consultation itself to be indicative of Yoga Alliance reaching beyond its mandate. A similar crisis in authority affects many membership-based yoga organisations. Here in Britain, the British Wheel of Yoga attempted to create national standards for yoga teaching, provoking significant criticism from the wider yoga teaching community (see Yates, 2016, Yoga Alliance Professionals, 2016), and contributing to the resignation of its own chair (see BWY, 2018).

Anti-governance activism in yoga includes many voices, such as J Brown (2018), who oppose the bureaucratic control of yoga teaching in any form. But the most vocal of opponents seek instead a return to the competing lineage orthodoxies that dominated the twentieth century teaching of yoga. Such modern, transnational lineage structures evolved from very different pre-modern processes of teaching yoga, yet are now positioned as the guardians of Indian heritage by those who call themselves yoga traditionalists (Wildcroft, 2018b). In contrast to lineage structures, all cross-lineage peer networks are considered by some activists to be culturally appropriative.

For many who have become uncomfortable with self-definitions grounded in an institutional identity, the label of post-lineage yoga is an opportunity to discover themselves as part of an apparent revolution beyond their immediate community of practice. For those most threatened by the recognition of any yoga subculture with grassroots approaches to recognising authority however, the term is immediately threatening. On social media, any discussions that centre around the evolution of yoga gather significant levels of vitriol and misinformation.

In my own case, within less than a week of being listed on the Yoga Alliance website as part of the standards review project, the term 'post-lineage yoga' was included in ever-widening circles of defamation. My research had unexpectedly become subject to a very different kind of 'impact and engagement' from that envisaged by the ideals of the Research Excellence Framework (see 2019d). The definition of post-lineage yoga was misrepresented as white supremacist, and naming as academic description and approval were deliberately conflated (see Timbers, 2018b). Some claimed that I advocated for, or even founded 'Post Lineage Yoga' (sic) as a brand. Citation and copyright were also confused, with the accusation that my attempts to clarify my own descriptor were an attempt to 'own' the practice itself. Multiple commenters even claimed that they invented the term:

> People are trying to trademark 'post-lineage' like it's unique. The sweetest thing is that they are complaining about my not citing their apparently proprietary term…while not citing me. (In the comment thread of Jamison, 2018)

There was no record on the internet, nor in published scholarship, of the term 'post-lineage' existing prior to my work. Following consultation with senior colleagues, and without responding to specific examples of misinformation directly, on 9th March 2018, I made a post to Facebook and my own blog, addressing three points. Firstly, I informed readers that an academic description of post-lineage yoga does not equate to approval. Secondly, I clarified the definition of post-lineage yoga as neither anti-lineage nor anti-tradition. Lastly, I asked that I be cited correctly when possible (Wildcroft, 2018c). It did little to reclaim the ongoing narrative, strongly suggesting that my accusers were not mistaken, but were deliberately promoting misinformation.

As far as can be determined, their aim was to discredit any Yoga Alliance consultants who were followed by large numbers of yoga teachers on social media, and who were not subject to the legal protections common to large organisations. This kind of hostile response to academic engagement activities is extremely difficult to predict in advance, and increasingly so in social media spaces. But even when anticipated, the standard institutional process for managing controversial research is to embargo publication, and restrict access to the results of the research. This disadvantages such research within

the REF requirements, and in my own case, would have restricted public and policy access to important and relevant research. In sum, it is difficult to conceive of a strategy for engaging yoga communities in research outputs such as this which would be immune from possible hostile responses.

Yoga and Hindu nationalism

A month before this, on 27th January 2018, Matthew Remski was due to visit the UK, and he and I had arranged to discuss our respective research in progress at a small private event. A few days before the event, an invitation was requested from the Facebook account of a British Hindu nationalist who had frequently attacked Remski, myself and others on social media (Sharma, 2018b). Instead, Remski offered to meet him in a more public debate. That invitation was refused, and our accuser informed us in Facebook comments that we were culturally appropriating yoga, because our private event would lack "Indian representation". I responded that among the attendees were at least one person of Indian heritage, and one non-resident Indian national. Despite this, I was later accused in multiple threads and blog posts of banning Indians from my engagement events, a lie knowingly repeated by others:

> I find it sad that people like Remski and Wildcroft deny people of Indian descent who request to attend their classes and lectures. Because that would mean they would have be questioned for following a White supremacist playbook of usurping another culture's knowledge and tradition in turn for profit. (Timbers, 2018a)

This interaction marked the escalation of accusations against myself and other consultants by a small group of Hindu nationalists, based mostly in North America and Britain. Hindu nationalists espousing a far-right agenda are frequently found in unlikely alliances with liberal North American activists in yoga-related social media (McCartney, 2019, Jain, 2018). They collectively agree that all research into any form of yoga by non-Indians is a form of cultural imperialism. Under attack by influential and often wealthy individuals is the status of all etic religious studies research (Jain, 2014). This includes the aforementioned British Hindu nationalist, who is connected not only to far-right Indian politicians, but both far-right figures and Conservative politicians in Britain (Dawkins, 2017). Speaking of both historical Indology and the contemporary study of religion, he writes:

> What useful purpose does a Yoga scholar or a Yoga historian actually serve? If one wanted to learn differential calculus one would seek out a mathematician not a 'Maths historian' and with humility and respect ask to be taught. In the world of Occidental Yoga there seems to be a plague of 'Yoga Academics'. (Sharma, 2018a)

Yoga Studies as a sub-discipline is uniquely vulnerable to a growing anti-intellectualism in social media discourse. As the product of complex encounters between India and the rest of the world, yoga is a term that encompasses: a physical and mental practice for health and wellbeing; a

metaphysical system describing the ongoing creation of the universe; a devotional, ritual practice (Newcombe, 2013), and a system of ethics and other social practices for righteous living. Increasingly, for some Hindu nationalists, yoga also denotes a narrowly Vedantic form of Hindu theology (McCartney, 2019). And whilst Hindu nationalism as a political movement is diverse (Beckerlegge, 2011), Hindu nationalist discourse on social media repeatedly blurs semantic boundaries concerning yoga practices, Vedantic philosophy and Indian politics until scholars who research the history of postural practice or Hindu philosophical traditions, are accused of appropriating the ineffable practices of a historically oppressed religious culture (Beckerlegge, 2011, India, 2014, Singleton, 2016). As one anonymous scholar wrote in a private email:

> I am not saying there is some watertight conspiracy here, but I do think there is a convergence of forces that will […] make it very difficult for others of us who want to write and speak on the same basic set of issues to do so safely.

On yoga-related social media the nationalist discourse is coherent, narrowly focused, and hostile not only to scholarship, but to the ideal of consensus truth that defines academic peer review. As Nanda writes:

> So how can people be made to believe in something regardless of what the evidence says, and still maintain the fiction of an open public sphere? […] extend the "right" to the people to construct their own truths, by their own lights, while denying the very possibility of objective facts (Nanda, 2005)

Such issues are far from exclusive to yoga-related social media. With a few exceptions (such as Hendricks and Vestergaard, 2019), significant scholarship on the rise of strategic misinformation online has yet to emerge, but as Jane reminds us: "contemporary netiquette not only tolerates—but often expects— internet interlocutors to reach for a hyperbolic rape, torture, or death threat the moment they disagree" (Jane, 2015). 'Fake news' is an accusatory term increasingly used in misinformation itself (Ross and Rivers, 2018). Furthermore, as Jane writes:

> the scholarly attention given to [such] discourse […] has been diminishing at a time when the realworld circulation of online hostility has been markedly increasing. One possible explanation is that e-bile is metaphorically 'unspeakable' [falling] well outside the norms of what is usually considered 'civil' academic discourse. (Jane, 2015).

A fortnight of trolling behaviours

A deliberate ambivalence surrounds the attitude of the creators of misinformation towards the narratives they repeat. In my own case, it is impossible to ascertain if my accusers truly believe me to be a white supremacist, although it is doubtful, given the available examples of my work online. But as a target, the discourse is not one that grants me a voice (Phillips, 2015). My representation within it is as a caricature of all that is presumed to

be wrong in contemporary yoga. In-group humour and frequent changes in tone are commonly used to dehumanise and isolate intended targets. I am both and at the same time accused of taking my accusers too seriously, and the accusations not seriously enough. All these behaviours are consistent with Whitney Phillips' descriptions of 'trolling' (Phillips, 2015).

The timescales involved in online trolling proceed at a disorienting speed incompatible with the processes of traditional academic inquiry. In the early months of 2018, 'post-lineage yoga' was a niche term from an unpublished body of research. It became a commonly used term in less than a fortnight. By that point, some online comments were already demanding that I publish not just my research, but also an accompanying analysis of the appropriateness of the term for multiple North American yoga teaching subcultures. Elsewhere, deliberate misinformation by ten to twenty provocateurs had led to widespread confusion about where the term had originated.

In one thread in 'The Connected Yoga Teacher Group', one person wrote:

> I first question if we're in a 'post-lineage' age, considering lineage is available to us […]. (see Auder, 2019)

In response another said:

> I could be misunderstanding the term, since I only heard it for the first time this week. Now it seems to be all over my Facebook feed

The first responded:

> I believe it was recently coined by Remski or Wildcroft, to refer to a particular approach, but I'm not sure if it's an accurate or precise term

Nine more comments discussing the term followed. Within hours of the first, I had responded with an explanatory graphic, and a full citation, receiving passing gratitude in return. To conclude the thread, the first commentator returned to make the dubious claim that she had not been able to ask me, or tag me directly into the conversation "for some reason", even though she had previously added me as a Facebook friend *specifically in order to follow my research*.

For the following fortnight, I discovered numerous such comment threads that demonstrated a spectrum of affect from the curious, to the combative. It is plausible to assume that many more such threads passed beneath my notice. Without intervention, and most commonly, 'post-lineage yoga' was redefined as a perspective that was antagonistic to both lineage, and the Indian origins of yoga. As a scholarly term, 'post-lineage yoga' addresses the common and imprecise division between 'traditional' and 'modern' yoga. Online, the term was retrofitted to reinforce that same artificial division, with 'post-lineage' being used to describe any 'non-traditional' yoga. Any

reluctance or delay on my part to produce accessible answering commentary in forums happening largely without my knowledge, was treated as a breach of the consensus ethics of social media space. Some groups of yoga teachers online even agreed that as 'post-lineage' was now part of the subcultural repertoire, they had the right to use, define and redefine the term at will.

Evidence strongly suggests that my work was not the true target of these online behaviours. Those who had seeded an already high-affect discourse about yoga teaching standards and practices with the term 'post-lineage yoga' demonstrated an active interest in distorting its definition to political ends. Their aim was to manufacture outrage, and by doing so discredit attempts by Yoga Alliance and other similar groups to create consensus standards for the teaching of yoga by their members. If the public reception and impact of an important yoga-related piece of scholarship was jeopardised as a result, this was only collateral damage.

Groups, rebels and orthodoxies

Much of the trolling behaviour within the subculture is coordinated in private Facebook groups. Private discussion groups are common within yoga-related social media. With such groups, non-members can visit a public 'About' page, and request membership, but not read any content posted within. Most public groups are considered to be combative, incoherent, or dominated by self-promotion rather than discussion. Private groups are usually seeded by a small number of people. They may gather members at a rapid rate, but fall dormant as quickly. Knowing which spaces are currently active, and actively moderated in a way that feels like calm discussion is possible, takes a significant investment of time. Groups that become popular are targeted by small, semi-coordinated groups of online identities who seek to impose a fervent orthodoxy on such questions as what defines a 'safe' yoga practice, whether specific innovations in practice are 'true' yoga or not, and what counts as 'cultural appropriation' in yoga (for examples of this debate in online news media see Johnson and Ahuja, 2016, Pells, 2015). As a result, what appears to be the group consensus of hundreds of members may in fact be dominated by the posts and comments of ten or less. Apart from the aforementioned Hindu nationalist voices, the vast majority of these identities appear to be white and North American.

Most group moderators ban those exhibiting the most consistent trolling behaviours. Similarly, public figures who are consistently attacked by the same online identities will often block them. But for the trolls, the ban or block is proof not that their behaviour is offensive, but that they have spoken a truth that their targets are attempting to suppress.

In a recent thread, one comment reads:

> I can't see anything Matthew Remski posts here because he blocks anybody who disagrees with him. (In the comment thread of Auder, 2019)

Similar comments follow, expressing pride in being blocked, employing insulting epithets and claiming personal knowledge of transgressive behaviour by Remski:

> He's a douche. He saw a window to write about this for $$. Folks don't know his dark side. Plain and simple...he sucks.

The comments combine to form a moment of in-group solidarity characterised by a common repertoire of insults, accusations, and, significantly, in-group humour (Phillips, 2015). As each member of the blocked in-group adds another comment, the rest respond with either a 'like' or a 'laughing' reaction emoji. The number of commenters is small, but the shared narrative is consistent and affect-laden.

The comments continue:

> I'll just add, since I too am blocked (as part of the nefarious TROLL brigade of his imagination)...Matthew Remski is a drunk thesaurus. He has the writing skills of a smart high schooler who thought it was cool to get high and write stuff […] My goal here is to make sure as many ppl as possible associate the phrase "drunk thesaurus" with MR.

By this process of small-group consensus, trolls ridicule public figures in yoga-related social media for being unprofessional, unscientific, unspiritual, 'unyogic' (McCartney, 2019) or culturally appropriative. The targets include not just those who investigate contemporary practice, but also those whose work challenges an increasingly compromised subcultural orthodoxy (Wildcroft, 2018b), and those who manage post-lineage spaces, online or off. The motives, ethics, and research practices of writers such as yoga historian Mark Singleton (2016) and science journalist William Broad (2013) are routinely criticised in yoga-related social media discourse, and trolls seed those debates with misinformation. Trolls also use the moderators of social media as proxies for any regulation of yoga discourse. Yoga-related social media groups that admit the possibility of teaching and sharing yoga knowledge outside of lineage hierarchies are thus equally declared to be guilty of 'appropriating' yoga, and their moderators are targeted.

In some cases, a new private Facebook group will be created by the trolls themselves that parodies a group that has been targeted. The description that accompanies the group will describe it as 'honest' or some other euphemism for combative. After an outbreak of trolling behaviour and retaliatory bans in the 'Yoga and Movement Research Community' group (see 2019j), the main instigators of trolling threads created a number of parody groups, including: 'The Yoga Show' group (see 2019l), and another group *also* called the 'Yoga and Movement Research Community' (see 2019k). 'The Yoga Show' group's description, updated on 21st March 2018, reads:

> A space to discuss the things that the other groups won't, in ways that the other groups prohibit […] You will undoubtedly see a great deal of lampooning, roasting, and bemoaning of yoga industry, sometimes resulting in heated debate. This is all part of the real life Yoga Show and can't be avoided. (2019l)

The public presence of the parody 'Yoga and Movement Research Community' group mostly makes jokes at the expense of the original group's creator, Diane Bruni (see Bruni, 2018). But in the same week that the image discussed at the start of this article appeared, the group changed its public description to display the following messages:

> (9th March 2018): 'Post Lineage Yoga is my invention which combines White [sic] supremacy, colonial thought, and capitalistic branding' Theodora Wildcroft, founder of PLY

> (9th March 2018): Glad we got your attention Matthew, Theo, and Carol. As long as you continue to contribute to White supremacy in yoga you shall be taunted a second time. Your mothers were all hamsters, and your fathers smelt of elderberries!

> (11th March 2018): If the only thing this group does is have people who think they dominate the Western yoga narrative to reflect that they are indeed supporting the triad of colonialist thought, capitalistic branding, and White supremacy in the yoga world, then mission accomplished. The onus is now on Matthew, Carol and Theo to show how they are not a part of this. Good luck with that! (2019k)

The first description describes post-lineage yoga as a combination of white supremacy and capitalism, deliberately mimicking citation practices. It also claims that I am the founder of a yoga brand, rather than the creator of an academic descriptor.

The second description expresses delight that the previous description has been noticed. Matthew Remski, and Carol Horton are, once again, added as targets. The description adds taunts lifted from the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam and Jones, 1975), in an attempt to add in-group humour.

Between the three descriptions, the one-sided discourse moves from apparent citation, to joking taunt, to a challenge, to a final threat. That threat was confirmed elsewhere on Facebook, where a former member of 'The Yoga Show' group discussed the conversations happening behind the privacy wall:

> They want nothing but to see you all destroyed. […] If anyone spoke out, the pile on was swift and deadly. (In the comment thread of Remski, 2018).

Reach, voice and ambivalence

Returning to that last description, we find the convoluted turn of phrase: "people who think they dominate the Western yoga narrative". Among the

accusations made against the consultants engaged by Yoga Alliance, the most consistent was that our opinions had been amplified over more deserving voices. Social media reach is considered by trolls to be a valuable resource that can be liberated, and pirated. Public figures are frequently asked to justify their numbers of followers by people who, by definition, also consider such figures important enough to engage with. As of 15th March 2019, my personal Facebook account has received 'friend' requests from two thousand yoga teachers with whom I have had no prior contact. My account is 'followed' by over five hundred more (see 2019e). This is a side-effect of my research over which I have no intentional control. Matthew Remski's personal account lists over five thousand followers (see 2019c). In contrast, the Boycott Yoga Alliance group page has gathered just over a thousand 'likes' to date. In comparison, Yoga Alliance currently has over 90,400 members (2019i).

Trolls 'tag' the names of public figures with any significant reach, such as myself, because doing so increases their much smaller reach to include those who follow us. Although trolls only engage with public figures as "fetishized pawns in the trolls' game" (Phillips, 2015), and consider any ban or block as a victory, they also commonly accuse their targets of refusing to engage in debate with them.[2] Trolls employ such provocative arguments in part because there is so little incentive for any public figure to engage with a minority group arguing in bad faith. The proportion of these involved in actively trolling yoga-related social media spaces are vanishingly small. In March 2018, myself and a small number of those targeted experimented with blocking thirty to forty of the worst online identities. As a direct consequence: trolling largely disappeared from our social media feeds and trolls cannot use tags to gain direct access to our audience. Nonetheless, this small number can still dominate a transnational discourse involving thousands of readers, through the volume of their posts, the exaggerated effect of their discourse, and a common repertoire of targets, repeated accusations, and shared humour. Those of us who have blocked trolls must still engage with the impact of their discourse.

It is vital to separate legitimate dissent and even combative debate, from trolling as a subversion of cultural consensus. Trolls seek to dominate discourse by any means necessary, to only be *seen* to win an apparently fair argument whose true terms of engagement are reset at will by the trolls alone (Phillips, 2015). But their aim is also to produce a cultural discourse marked indelibly by confusion and ambivalence, one in which the only recognisable consensus is the fast-moving, volatile in-group humour of the trolls themselves, and their ever-shifting list of targets.

From small groups of semi-coordinated trolling activists, to secretly-funded, algorithmically-driven campaigns of fake news (Hendricks and Vestergaard, 2019), the combination of misinformation and the distorted amplification of

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[2] As this is an open access journal, and thus indexed by search engines, I have decided not to increase the reach of trolls by naming them in the main text.

reach is now an established social media strategy for activists from all sides of political debate. Trolling can be monetised, automated, and translated into political soft power. "Trolls are in many ways [now] the grinning poster children for the socially networked world" (Phillips, 2015).

Anonymity and dissociation

Whilst most yoga trolling happens from accounts associated with public identities, the most libellous trolling is often pseudonymous. A number of researchers have examined the effect of anonymity on disinhibiting behaviour online. It engenders a disruption of authority in which trolls see themselves as independent pioneers "in a make-believe dimension" (Suler, 2004), engaged in the generation of "schism, confusion and ambivalence" (Thomassen, 2013). Pseudonymous online identities combine with the liminal affect of online spaces, to obscure motives and misrepresent the relative socio-political power of both troll and target.

'John Timbers' was co-creator of the 'Yoga and Research Movement Community' parody group above. The 'John Timbers' name is not only active on social media, it was also the name of an account on the blogging site, Medium. That account repeated the most common trolling accusations in a format impersonating traditional editorial journalism. Other trolls linked to those posts on social media, legitimising the misinformation further. 'John Timbers' is also strongly rumoured to be an alternative account for the online identity that set up 'The Yoga Show'. If this rumour is true, it is worth noting that he and his partner created the 'Boycott Yoga Alliance' page, and have been responsible for most of the content posted on it, including posts by 'John Timbers'. All these online identities position themselves as anti-corporate rebels fighting the increasing corporatisation of contemporary yoga. Yet the aforementioned partner is a commercially-successful yoga teacher who has modelled for major fitness brands (Davis, 2015). Most recently, she appeared on a podcast for the most successful London yoga chain, TriYoga (see 2019f). In it she makes no reference to her personal involvement in an extensive pattern of trolling activism, instead claiming to have reduced her involvement with Facebook because it is "very, very argumentative" (Priest, 2018).

Even apparently transparent online identities can therefore involve significant pretence. Many of those who defend 'traditional' yoga from 'white yoga teachers' use Sanskrit names and abstract profile images to deflect from the fact that they are also white and American. One such account responded to my clarification of the 'post-lineage' term four months after it was posted with the following comment:

> How ironic, stating citation is important for your made up term, but citing a lineage is not. (In the comment thread of Wildcroft, 2018a).

A common demand made of public figures like me is that we provide evidence of our direct connection to a yoga lineage. This commenter went on

to claim that all "white yoga teachers" were appropriating yoga, yet she herself is a white American yoga teacher. Her Facebook account however displays her name as "Devī Bhaktānanda" (see Westbrook, 2019). In the religious memetics of yoga-related social media, Sanskrit names mark white practitioners as anointed by direct contact with an Indian lineage. For a small minority, they are thus proof against the taint of cultural appropriation. This holds true even when the name in question has been conferred by a white teacher. Yet purity and contamination form an unstable vector for determining religious power (Varga, 2005). It is the inherent vulnerability of such sanctified status that fuels the search for post-lineage heretics to attack on social media, and so a Sanskrit name can sanctify trolling behaviours as a form of ongoing inoculation against more accusations of cultural appropriation. Even Indians and diasporic Hindus who depart from the chain of lineage can be accused of internalising their own colonial oppression. And in a significant number of the combative encounters on yoga-related social media, *both sides* consider themselves to be engaged in challenging white supremacists in the name of purity and tradition.

The resulting widespread dissociation of religious and professional identities is amplified by the "objectification, selective attachment, and pervasive self-involvement" of social media (Phillips, 2015). Pseudonymous tricksters generate actually libellous material without fear of legal reprisals. This material is propagated by other trolls whilst denying responsibility for its truth. Other online identities replicate material accusations to prove their own sincerity. Some of these identities are operated by the same people. The reach of a troll is amplified with each new identity assumed, and each time misinformation is shared, and each time, the humanity of trolling targets is accordingly diminished. Trolling targets are the source material for a pedagogical moment in which all concerned can demonstrate their intellectual and ethical superiority to others.

Original sin and intellectual dishonesty

In such cases trolling meets 'call-out culture': a form of contemporary social media discourse in which any speech act considered to be oppressive, is called out, preferably by 'allies' rather than the marginalised group affected by the prohibited speech. In response to a 'call-out' the accused, as the one supposedly holding the most privilege, should always apologise unreservedly (Serano, 2013). Addressing the implicit bias in shared cultural spaces is obviously important. But evidently, when online identities are often pseudonymous to varying degrees, masking one's own level of socio-political privilege and distorting that of one's target, is an effective strategy to dominate debate by invoking a subcultural call-out on one's own, or another's behalf.

Call-outs are intrinsically performative, and often collective. They allow white yoga practitioners a short-term opportunity to artificially resolve their own perceived complicity in cultural appropriation through a public

demonstration of 'allyship'. The effect is inflected by familiar tropes of sin, confession, and righteous retribution. In practice, those who most succeed at this form of performative expiation are not the most marginalised of groups. They are instead the most articulate, and those with the leisure time and access to keep up with current memes and target issues. Above all, to take most profitable advantage from trolling and call-out culture in transnational yoga, one must have intimate knowledge of the North American cultural landscape. In light of this, both trolling and call-out culture are themselves a form of American cultural imperialism, and one whose ontology is thus unsurprisingly Protestant:

> White privilege is the secular white person's Original Sin, present at birth and ultimately ineradicable. One does one's penance by endlessly attesting to this privilege in hope of some kind of forgiveness. (McWhorter, 2018).

A significant minority of the minor players in trolling and call-outs also happen to be graduate students, working on yoga-related dissertations. These educated, and almost always white, American women maintain intimate knowledge of yoga-related social media for their own research purposes. A significant minority share trolling material targeting other scholars, and add 'likes' and 'laughing' emoji responses. Again, by calling-out another's 'white supremacy', such early-career researchers seek to inoculate their own work from accusations of cultural appropriation. In an increasingly competitive career climate, it is worth speculating on the many ways in which trolling tactics can be leveraged to professional advantage. At the height of this episode of trolling, a number of such graduate students made public demands to 'audit' my work to assess whether the accusations of trolls were correct, or made offers to 'collaborate' on articles. It is reasonable to presume that at least some of these students were keen to gain access to as-yet unpublished output from a rival scholar, and some wished to increase their own reach and engagement through connection to my own success. All would have confirmed their own emic status and thus access to yoga-related discourse by joining the debate, even if their demands or offers were refused.

As I discovered, scholars whose work has been misappropriated become subject to Brandolini's Law of bullshit (sic) asymmetry: "the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it". The ease with which social media enables the separation of content from creator only increases this asymmetry. "More often than not, content functions as the visual equivalent of a sound bite" (Phillips, 2015), too easily separated from its context, and shared. In my own case, refuting or clarifying every time the term 'post-lineage' was mis-cited in confusion or malice was impossible. More hopefully, I have found that increased subcultural engagement in-person, at conferences and yoga teacher trainings, appears to be a slow and intensive corrective to social media misinformation.

There is as yet no robust data detailing the effect of trolling on yoga-related scholarship. Anecdotally and according to private correspondence, many of

those targeted either maintain a list of 'blocked' accounts, or have severely restricted their social media engagement. Some have closed their personal accounts. A few maintain a second profile on which to regularly monitor trolling activities. This is essential in cases where trolls have threatened to organise public boycotts of yoga studios, conferences and university events that host people they are targeting. As more experienced yoga scholars told me, anonymously:

> [This] can have (and maybe is already having) a dire effect on scholarship, both at a personal and institutional level. […] Increasingly, people turn to private money to pursue their research, or to keep their job. In India-related subjects, this money may come from […] people [who] have a huge stake in destroying western Indology.

> Careers have been affected and some have been placed on 'scholar at risk' lists after threats to their lives. I know of one scholar who is said to have abandoned his former area of research.

Persuasion architectures and algorithmic intelligence

Whilst some trolling is inherently anarchic and amoral, most coordinated trolling in yoga-related spaces involves 'digital vigilantism'. Digital vigilantism is encouraged by the structures of peer surveillance embedded in social media platforms, and "occurs in a cultural context where users are coming to terms with the relation between online activity and offline consequences" (Trottier, 2017). Rumours on WhatsApp fuel mob violence in India (Sushma, 2017). Female writers attract violent threats on Twitter (Jane, 2015). Alt-right activists 'dox' investigating journalists (Wilson, 2018b).

Trolls involved in digital vigilantism prefer targets that reinforce a polarised moral code against the ambiguity of online space, re-inscribing a common axiological circle around the subculture with the trolling target on the outside. That reinforced morality comes at an expense. The battle for authority and accountability detailed in this article provokes an increasing slippage between fact, propaganda and parody. It transforms consensus reality concerning the history, science, and philosophies of yoga into an ever more mutable, contested resource. Even the trolls themselves are often exhausted by the process. Parody groups, activist pages and pseudonymous accounts frequently become dormant after a few months or years, to be replaced by others.

The medium of choice for yoga trolling is Facebook, a platform embedded in multiple areas of our online lives, making porous the boundaries between professional activities, personal attachments and social activism. It is also an arena in which users are encouraged to respond to any post with heightened affect. Reaction emojis encourage users to like or love, hate or be amazed by the content of others, but not to be thoughtful or unsure. Almost all social media platforms reward prolific engagement by users, and encourage users to insert themselves into conversations without appropriate context clues. As a

result, social media discourse is commonly dominated by the most polarised intent, the most emotive prose, and the most prolific sharers of content. Even as platform founders publicly condemn trolling and vigilantism, social media continues to alter the consensus protocols of human interaction, offline as well as on.

Some analyses of social media behaviour call for better community moderation or legal intervention (Phillips, 2015). This ignores the fact that the community-building activity that social media platforms claim to promote is not their main purpose. Such platforms are instead 'persuasion architectures' (Tufekci, 2017), designed independent of considerations of harm or evidential truth. They are optimised not for increasing the sum of human knowledge or fellow feeling, but for addiction and obfuscation. Their financial survival depends on producing an enormous amount of social data to be monetised and manipulated by corporate and governmental actors. This necessitates deep surveillance and the development of artificially intelligent systems to manage that data. Many of the algorithms governing social media have unexpected and anti-social side effects (Wilson, 2018a). And some of the most vocal accounts dominating social media discourse may not even correspond to human identities. "Facebook estimate[s] that as many as 60 million bots may be infesting its platform" (Lazer et al., 2018). The VR pioneer Jaron Lanier has also warned about the unforeseeable effects of combining persuasion-based social media with increasingly immersive technologies:

> The rhetoric from the companies is […] that what they're really doing […] is building the giant global brain that'll inherit the earth and they'll upload you to that brain and then you won't have to die. […] And so it's turning into this new religion, and it's a religion […] that's completely lacking in empathy or any kind of personal acknowledgment. (Kulwin, 2018)

Towards a new axiology of the internet

Here at the conclusion of my PhD I have fifty online identities blocked on Facebook, yet sporadic news of more trolling still reaches me. Any new mention of my work on social media could provoke a further wave of attacks. Any scholar of religion could be next to encounter the same situation.

Fake news is evolving into a highly politicised, organised form of misinformation (Lazer et al., 2018). Trolling increasingly dominates online political discourse, leveraging existing socio-political dynamics to divide communities and delegitimise marginalised voices (Phillips, 2015). Human actors on social media are manipulated by algorithms beyond the control of their creators (Tufekci, 2017). Ontological security is an inequitably distributed resource (Rossdale, 2015) that can be bought at the price of filtering out debate (Nanda, 2005). In language at least, we continue to divide contemporary culture into 'online' and 'real world' spheres. Scholars, technologists and policy makers still largely act as if social media discourse is adjacent to 'real' culture. Academic institutions are left unprepared when the

tools of public engagement are weaponised against scholarship itself. Whilst numerous policy documents have been written on the importance of measuring the impact of research via social media, I have found none addressing the growing impact of social media on research in turn. Meanwhile democracies stumble, and the ideal of negotiated, consensus reality that guides academic knowledge production and the mutual social contract is contested.

Nonetheless, as a researcher of contemporary yoga practice, I know that behaviours common in yoga-related social media spaces would still be unthinkable in the yoga studio or shala, where students and teachers alike are conditioned by a strong culture of respect. Through bodily co-presence, civilised behaviour is entrained into habitus (Mellor and Shilling, 2010). Yet our online spaces are not disembodied. The use of social media in particular is governed by pre-civilised limbic instincts more than mental processes (Tufekci, 2017). The disinhibition and amplified effect of social media are connected to both the uncertainty of online spaces, and the addictiveness of platform architectures. But do they also show us how, unmoored from the established cultural protocols governing the *meeting* of physical bodies, our minds are freer to act out the impulses of our most primitive physical reflexes?

Beyond any resources we might develop to help keep both individual academics, and the academy itself safe online, we are in need of cultural, not just technological solutions. What can anthropological understandings of axiological development suggest to formalise our online connections into assumptions of dignity and civility? Could there be an online equivalent of the handshake, built into our greetings with strangers? And could such rituals help us to imagine an animism of the internet, where one can be capable of the feat of imagination that is recognising the dignity of another sentient, animate being within one's news feed?

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