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## Promoting Qualitative Research in the Public Sphere: Lessons Learned from Online Criticisms

*Chad Walker*

### INTRODUCTION

What will you do when research participants and others threaten to terminate your study? Though public disapproval of research is nothing new, there has been little discussion surrounding activism against academics. More often, discussions relate to the role of the academic *as* activist (see Castree 2000). In this short chapter, I take the reader through my story of taking qualitative research into the public sphere. To do so, I first outline my graduate research and explain why I chose to engage with participants and the public more broadly. Next, in order to illustrate the potential negative feedback qualitative researchers in particular may face, I highlight the comments received as a result of my work. Finally, the chapter closes with some first-hand advice—providing the reader with an opportunity to learn how I was able to get through these difficult moments and continue on with an academic career.

### BACKGROUND

Under the encouragement of two academic mentors during my undergraduate program, I decided to begin a research-based master's degree (MA) in geography at Western University in 2010. The MA research employed in-depth qualitative interviews ( $n = 21$ ) to examine social responses to wind energy development in Ontario. I chose interviews because I was interested in understanding the in-depth, daily life impacts—including health problems—of those living near wind turbines. While credible research has since been done showing a lack of direct health effects (i.e., mediated through noise annoyance and planning processes; see Chapman 2014; Michaud et al. 2016; Walker, Baxter, and Ouellette 2015), during the time of my studies there was some media and grey literature that suggested otherwise. This uncertainty in rural communities helped breed degrees of resentment and conflict amongst local residents (Walker, Baxter, and Ouellette 2014) and between residents and the provincial government (McRobert, Tennent-Riddell, and Walker 2017; Songsore and Buzzelli

2014); thus, the issue of wind energy had become politically charged and I was ready for the possibility of interviews becoming emotional or contentious in nature. Further, due to recent calls for broadly defined environmental research to be more applied (Clark and Dickson 2003; Garb, Pulver, and VanDeveer 2008) and presented as “usable knowledge” (Owens 2005, 287), I decided to make a conscious effort to make my findings visible and accessible. To do so, I made sure my thesis was posted to a publicly available online forum, and for select publications that followed, I helped write media releases and made myself available for the interview requests. This resulted in meetings with several local and regional media organizations who eventually shared my research findings across their respective outlets. While I enjoyed these experiences and still think it was the right thing to do, at the time I could not have imagined what was to come as a result of “going public.”

## CRITICISMS FROM PARTICIPANTS

In the pages to follow, I share the criticisms faced in the months after my research was published and promoted. First through participant feedback and then online forums, criticisms of my work began somewhat constructively and then evolved into personal assaults on my integrity, intelligence, and abilities as an academic.

The first set of comments that were directed at me personally was received as a result of a member checking exercise used to increase qualitative rigour (see Baxter and Eyles 1997). Member checking, which has been called “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 314), occurs when researchers take interpretations back to participants. In order to member check, I created a 10-page summary document of preliminary findings and sent it to all 21 participants, asking them if I “got it right” or fairly represented conversations with them. Though most of the feedback I received ( $n = 12$ ) showed appreciation for the research conducted in the community, there were a few instances in which this was not the case. Most of these comments made were on the grounds that the *qualitative* analysis provided was not seen as credible research. This critique was not entirely surprising, as qualitative researchers have long faced criticisms from the public and other academics including the perceived lack of validity and secrecy behind qualitative analysis (Anfara, Brown, and Mangione 2002; Sale, Lohfeld, and Brazil 2002). As a result, there is a tendency for the general public to hold quantitative research to a higher standard (Labuschagne 2003). In one response following the member checking exercise, a participant clearly disagreed with the methodological basis for the research:

There is so little data in your interpretation that anyone doing a peer review would be at a loss to say there is any validity to the comments you compiled.... There are just too many incommensable [*sic*], anecdotal [*sic*] stories. (“Barbara”)

“Barbara’s” comment showcases a common criticism of qualitative research. Her need for more data and fewer anecdotal stories suggests she values the breadth of quantitative data over the depth provided by qualitative research. In the weeks following sharing of the member checking document, I received an email that was several thousand words long from another participant opposed to wind turbines. In the email, he explained that I did not fairly represent his views and that because he saw my research as unethical, he would be taking up his complaints with the university administration—including the president. The idea of my research—something I was passionate about and spent so much of my life preparing for—being terminated because it was perceived as unethical was a scary proposition. In an attempt to best address the situation, I immediately met with my supervisor who suggested I contact the administration, including the research ethics board at my university, and set up a meeting. After the board reviewed my case, I was assured that because the research I had conducted was approved and no wrongdoing was evident from their perspective, I should not be worried about threats to shut down the project.

## CRITICISMS FROM THE PUBLIC

I also faced backlash from a range of online anti-wind energy activists. Following the publication of my thesis and later journal articles, I took part in interviews with media organizations. This led to several newspaper articles and radio broadcasts related to my research. Public remarks were enabled through discussion boards posted below these online media reports. One of the first comments seen relating to my work was posted beneath a media article that outlined a paper written by my supervisor. Despite the fact that the paper referred to a separate research project from my own, the majority of the conversation turned to my work during and following my MA.

This young fellow is not a science or engineering major. So what does he really know about IWT (Industrial Wind Turbine) scientific issues?... Since when does a geography department have students write “research” papers on subject matter outside of there [*sic*] knowlede [*sic*] sphere?... This is an opinion piece of work. (“Barbaron”)

This type of criticism may sound familiar to social scientists. Though academia is increasingly aware of the merit of social scientific inquiry (see Weber 2015), there are still some factions of the general public who see researchers outside of the natural sciences to be inferior. Other online commenters continued the assault on my research by explicitly attacking the reputation of Western University. I believe such comments—including those from “Sarahon,” below—are meant to discredit *both* the research conducted and the graduate degree acquired.

For many years Western has been known as the “party” university. Learning to drink beer is more important than academics. (Each university has their own calling among the kids.) Anyway it seems like nothing has changed re Western and a secondary degree from here is worth about as much as your first degree. Diddly squat!! (“Sarahon”)

Within the same comment board another person, “WillRon,” found the link to my thesis<sup>1</sup> and asked people to “please download and save a copy. I have.” They went on to suggest that the paper was undeserving of being deemed academic research when they said, “Are the standards really this low for a Master?” Together these comments illustrate a personal attack that simultaneously questions the academic standards of the university and my successful thesis defence.

Another theme found throughout the comment boards among those who disagreed with the findings from my thesis was criticism for being biased and/or funded by the green energy industry. Through these discussions, there emerged the perception that any research that suggested the expansion of renewable energy—however indirectly—was not to be trusted.

This student has swallowed the [Liberal] green aid totally, even footnotes Liberal talking points on the benefits to air quality.... A failure for sure!! Poor student. (Martin)

Someone should ask this “student of green madness” if he received or is still now receiving any monetary return for his biased Master’s thesis.... Students are very burdened with money worries as they continue with their pursuit of “higher/lower learning.” (“Thebiggreenlie”)

As these comments show, when people disagreed with the findings they would re-frame the findings to be biased and unethical. Interestingly, when a 2014 publication in *AIMS Energy* was promoted on the website of an anti-wind organization, people seemed to be more accepting of (some of) the findings when they agreed with their own ideas. While there were still some negative comments—such as “Highly disrespectful!” from a person named “Free Thinker”—most were encouraged by the fact that some findings agreed with their opinions. For example, a major conclusion from the publication was that turbines may negatively impact the value of some homes. “Barbara” and others tended to agree with this assertion and in doing so, avoided making any serious accusations of problems with the research or myself.

When you change the character of any neighbourhood/area this affects property values. This [research] is nothing new. (“Barbara”)

## DISCUSSION: TIPS FOR NEW RESEARCHERS

Though disapproval of academic research by the public is not new, writing about the difficulties faced by researchers is still rare. In using real examples of the backlash I faced, the goal of this chapter is to help novice qualitative researchers in particular begin to understand problems that can arise when research goes public. As was shown throughout the preceding pages, there can be tremendous risk when taking research findings into the public sphere—especially when studying controversial issues.

In my own example, a group of people became exposed to my research, disagreed with the results, and became very critical of it (and, in turn, me). My experiences in publishing and promoting qualitative research also suggest that people are much more likely to be critical of research findings when the findings disagree with their ideas about reality. This should be a point that researchers keep in mind when making their research public. That is certainly not to say that academics should conform their findings to fit what will be accepted by the public; rather, researchers should expect that research that challenges the status quo—a goal of many in the profession—will inevitably lead to critical examination from the public. Anticipating that activists and others will read your work should also make you more aware of any of its possible shortcomings. For example, based on the types of response I received during and after my MA, I am now more careful not to overstate any conclusion—even those that are supported by empirical evidence. Preparing for this kind of “public defence” may also help with thesis defences and journal article publication processes.

In the aftermath of a wave of criticisms and threats, there were a few things I did that enabled me to continue on toward my MA, and, later, a career in academia. It is my hope that the reader can learn from these in order to avoid any possible setbacks in similar cases. First, I was fortunate to have an experienced supervisor whom I felt comfortable talking with about the path forward in the face of some serious resistance. He was especially instrumental in reviewing my research and later assuring me that my practices were ethically sound. It is important for novice researchers in particular to meet with these types of people whose experience and mentorship abilities will bring some degree of calm.

Another suggestion I have also relates to the first steps that should be taken when researchers are faced with ethical or other accusations. As I did, I encourage people to reach out to their research ethics boards or offices for guidance. To this point, novice researchers in particular should not underestimate the ethics approval process at their own university. If I had left out even a minor detail from my ethics application (e.g., estimated sample size), the public may have had the means to shut down my research. Attention to these details and being truthful with ethics boards can assist in this way.

Third, upon the advice of my research supervisor, I also set up meetings with other members of the university administration—including the three who were named as

potential contacts for concerned citizens to get in touch with. These meetings were helpful in establishing a strong support system within the university—while I also sought comfort from people outside the academy. I was again fortunate to have a group of family and friends who assured me that I was not the type of person who would conduct unethical research. These assurances also allowed me to retain my mental well-being through some turbulent times.

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## CRAFTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH EXERCISES

1. In order to understand the public response you may receive as a result of your research, find a recent online news article that summarizes a paper in or related to your field of study. How was the research summarized and what kind of questions would you expect to come from the public? If there is a comment board, what kind of responses do you find? Do they match your expectations?
2. If you are collecting data through interviewing or focus groups, write down 5 to 10 questions or topics that may be contentious in nature. Make sure these issues are made clear in your ethics application. How could you best ask these types of questions without creating too much conflict or tension between yourself and your research participants? Practice asking them with other students who are playing the role of activists to see how you would respond to resistance and hostility.
3. Do your best to predict all probable major outcomes (at least three to five) from your study. For example, if you are studying access to abortion clinics, a major finding could be: “There is a general lack of abortion clinics in low-income neighbourhoods” or “Women often avoid clinics because of a social stigma.” What types of public responses do you think you would receive based on these findings? Are you ready for the possible backlash? Discuss with your academic supervisor.
4. In recent years, academics have turned to Twitter and other social media platforms to promote their research. Using #ScholarSunday and other discipline-specific hashtags, search Twitter for examples of researchers in your field who effectively shared their research. Using what you learned in question 1, what are the advantages of using social media over traditional news media outlets? Based on your new insights, what do you think is the best way to make your research public?

## NOTE

1. Western University makes all graduates theses publicly available through its Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository (<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/>). It will be helpful to know if your university has the same type of system in place.

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