Unreasonable rage, disobedient dissent: The social construction of student activists and the limits of student engagement
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Abstract: This article explores the limits of student engagement in higher education in the United Kingdom through the social construction of student activists within media discourses. It scrutinises the impact of dominant neoliberal discourses on the notion of student engagement, constructing certain students as legitimately engaged whilst infantilising and criminalising those who participate in protest. Exploring media coverage of and commentary on students engaged in activism, from the 2010 protests against university fee increases and from more recent activism in 2016, the article draws upon Sara Ahmed's (2014) *Willful Subjects* and Imogen Tyler's (2013) *Revolting Subjects* to examine critically the ways in which some powerful discourses control and limit which activities, practices and voices can be recognised as legitimate forms of student engagement.

Keywords: activism, discourse, higher education, media, neoliberalism, protest, social construction, student engagement

As I finished writing this article, the votes had already been cast and counted and the results announced for both the 2016 Referendum in the United Kingdom and for the 2016 election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States. Article 50 has been triggered, marking the start of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, and President Trump has been sworn into office. The polls, the political forecasts, the expert opinions, and even the betting agencies could not have predicted that the British and American people would find themselves facing these uncertain times.

This section is a brief snapshot of the effects of the British Referendum and the US election of Trump on higher education in the months that followed both events, providing the context for my discussion on the media construction of student activists and the limits of student engagement in the United Kingdom. Within this political climate, it seems especially important to consider whose voices are heard and whose engagement is valued within higher education.

The shockwaves of both results were immediately felt within higher education. In the United Kingdom, in the weeks and months since the Referendum, headlines regularly questioned what the impact of Brexit might mean for universities (Boffey 2016; Goodfellow 2016; Jones 2016). Applications from EU students to U.K. universities were down by 9 per cent within four months of the Referendum (Havergal 2016). There were reports of 'British academics being asked to leave EU-funded projects' (Sample 2016). In February 2017, just one month before the UK government triggered Article 50, Corbett and Gordon (2017) reported that:

> There is a great deal of uncertainty about what the government is thinking about Brexit and higher education. The recent disclosure that the Department for Exiting the European Union has no structure for dealing with research, education or universities, and [that] in the Department for Education there is no one dealing with leaving the EU has added to universities' concerns.

In the midst of the uncertainty about the future of UK higher education's global reputation, the government has proposed cutting international student numbers by nearly half (Fazackerley 2016).

Uncertainties are compounded by budget cuts and privatisation. In the days following the U.S. election, American university students staged walkouts and rallies, protesting the results (Schmidt 2016). In response to the student activism, an Iowa politician announced plans to introduce what he called the 'Suck it up, Buttercup' bill to cut the budgets of universities at which student activists were 'coddled' and to 'create new criminal penalties for protesters' (Schmidt 2016). An article by Millhiser (2016) revealed that Trump's post-election suggestions that people who burn the American flag should face jail time and lose their citizenship were unconstitutional. At the same time, then President-Elect Trump settled multiple class action fraud lawsuits, which were brought by former students of his now-defunct for-profit Trump University in California and New York, for $25 million (Lovett and Dillon 2016). In the U.K., the Browne Report in 2010 recommended enabling private, for-profit higher education providers to enter the market more easily and under less scrutiny (Watson 2014). Accordingly, the 2016 higher education White Paper declared the government's intentions to encourage the establishment of for-profit universities, which were referred to as 'challenger institutions': 'We will make it quicker and easier for new high quality challenger institutions to enter the market and award their own degrees' (BIS 2016: 6). The juxtaposition of the scandals making U.S. headlines of some private, for-profit higher education providers engaged in fraudulent practices with the move to encourage seemingly similar institutions in the U.K. adds to the uncertainty that is currently being felt within the British higher education sector.

Further uncertainty comes from anti-migration and mobility policies. Thousands of American university students face the possibility of deportation if President Trump follows through with his promise to dissolve President Obama's DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) programme (Wernick 2016). The programme provides young undocumented immigrants with the right to remain in the country. Some universities urged DACA students to return to the United States before the inauguration of President Trump, as their ability to re-enter the country was uncertain (Sanchez 2016). A number of university presidents declared that their institutions would serve as 'sanctuary campuses', indicating that the universities would not comply with immigration enforcement against their students. Among these institutions was Trump's own alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania (Laracy and Tan 2016).

On 27 January 2017, President Trump signed an executive order barring passport holders from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the U.S.A., including those who already had existing visas or green cards (Redden 2017). With countless numbers of academics and 'more than 17,000 students in the US … from the seven countries' affected by this executive order, the impact on higher education was immediate (Redden 2017). A letter declaring that this order 'threatens both American higher education and the defining principles of our country' was signed by forty-eight U.S. university presidents (Reilly 2017). Seventeen universities joined forces in a lawsuit to challenge the ban (Agerholm 2017). Whilst a number of court decisions have suspended the implementation of the ban, uncertainty remains about whether the executive order will be reinstated or whether a similar order will be issued to take its place (Roberts 2017).

For some, the reality of this new post-Referendum and President Trump world is dangerous, even life-threatening. Waves of hate crimes have been reported across the U.S. following the presidential election (Dearden 2016b): 'In response to the aftermath of the elections, some 150 college and university presidents have banded together to express their concern regarding the rise in hate crimes across the country' (Rodriguez 2016). In the U.K.,

hate crimes were reported to have increased by 57 per cent following the Referendum (Yeung 2016). On 15 September 2016, a 21-year-old University of Portsmouth student was stabbed in the neck with a broken bottle for speaking Polish. His injuries prevented him from returning to his studies (Dearden 2016a). Hundreds of university presidents in the United States have responded to post-election events by affirming support for their students, whether by acknowledging and denouncing the increase in hate crimes, by declaring their universities to be sanctuary campuses, or by denouncing the travel ban. However, universities in the United Kingdom have not taken similar actions in support of their students in the wake of the Referendum. This is where I want to situate the discussion of the media constructions of student activism and the limits of student engagement discourses in higher education in the United Kingdom.

In the U.K., when students raise their placards in political protest; when they stand on soapboxes, shout into megaphones and microphones, march through our campuses and our city streets, and organise, occupy and disrupt; and when they campaign for a more just and equal world, are their actions recognised and welcomed as 'student engagement'? Whilst dominant neoliberal media discourses construct student activists as childish, in contrast neoliberal discourses about student engagement position students as mature consumers who are able to make decisions to undertake a university degree and take on ever-increasing student debt. Through these conflicting discourses, I posit that student activism exists on the edges of engagement, allowing student activists to be easily constructed as either helpless children in need of adult supervision, or as dangerous criminals deserving of prosecution. Expanding upon claims made in a previous article (Danvers and Gagnon 2014), I continue to scrutinise the impact of dominant neoliberal media discourses about 'student engagement' that construct certain students as legitimately engaged in higher education whilst delegitimising other student activities such as protests.

In the following sections, I discuss some of the existing student engagement literature, especially the literature focused on discourses that reinforce the student-as-consumer model of higher education and that dismiss student protest as 'negative' and 'counter-productive'. Following that, I draw upon Ahmed's (2014) *Willful Subjects* and Tyler's (2013) *Revolting Subjects* to provide a theoretical and critical framework for examining the impact of dominant discourses that control and limit which student identities, activities, practices and voices are recognised as legitimate and which are made monstrous. Within that section, I also explore and challenge the concept of a seemingly endless young adulthood, which allows students to be constructed as children, and thus their political participation to be dismissed as child's play. I then examine the media coverage of and commentary on students engaged in activism from the 2010 protests against university fee increases in the U.K[1] and from more recent activism in 2016. If, as Trowler (2010) suggests, particular student activities can be positioned along a spectrum of engagement, then, I ask, must protest be limited to the 'negative' end of that spectrum?

Exploring the edges of engagement

Whilst the concept of student engagement has been employed in many ways, I am most interested in discussing the limits where the performance and measurement of engagement are rigidly normative. I question whether there is flexibility along the edges for challenging those restrictive limits. Axelson and Flick have suggested that 'the phrase "student engagement" has come to refer to how *involved* or *interested* students appear to be in their learning and how *connected* they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other' (2010: 38; original emphasis). Students' levels of involvement, interest, and connection or belonging are now primarily measured through standardised student experience surveys. The U.S.A.'s National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE 2017) uses a combination of questions

measuring the frequency of events and activities – for example, 'Connect ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge' – and questions eliciting[2] quasi-Likert-scale responses. The U.K.'s National Student Survey (NSS 2017) uses quasi-Likert-scale questions about satisfaction, measuring level of agreement with phrases such as 'I feel part of a community of staff and students'. Thus, student engagement has become synonymous with 'quality assurance', a development which is perfectly suited for the increasingly marketised higher education systems in both countries. As Axelson and Flick have argued (2010: 42):

> To speak of engagement as 'an aspect of institutional performance' or 'how the institution deploys its resources' is a semantic imprecision that hinders analytic uses of the concept. … [It] introduces an implicit explanation for engagement failures: at least one of the parties (students, institutions) is not living up to its responsibilities. The long-standing arguments about who is responsible for educational failures demonstrate that there is no shortage of ready culprits, ranging from underprepared and unmotivated students to ineffective pedagogies and instructors.

The consequence, then, of student engagement discourses, when invoked within a consumerist model of higher education, is that divisions are drawn between teaching staff and students and distinctions are made between 'students whose engagement is desired' and those 'whose disengagement is deplored' (Axelson and Flick 2010: 38). This is not to suggest that all student engagement scholars are uncritical of the increasingly marketised, student-as-consumer, neoliberal academy. Trowler has observed that 'many student engagement researchers challenge the neo-liberal market ideology which positions the student as consumer. Instead they argue for a "developmental" model of higher education, rooted in a "progressivist" ideology' (2015: 336).

Perhaps it is more productive, then, to imagine student engagement discourses themselves along a spectrum from those that are critical and complex to those that are neoliberal and conformist. Through that lens, as other academics have done before me (Axelson and Flick 2010; Fielding 2001), I continue to call into question whether (and why) neoliberal student engagement discourses themselves may work to reward obedience, homogeneity and conformity whilst punishing engagement that is critical, dissenting and wilful. Along that spectrum, is there space near the edges of engagement for some forms of protest to be celebrated?

Within her review of literature around student engagement, Trowler (2010: 6) proposed a spectrum of student engagement, on which attending lectures is positioned as 'positive' whilst boycotting and picketing is 'negative'. Trowler clarified (2010: 6) her definitions:

> The terms 'positive' and 'negative' are used here not to denote value judgment, but rather to reflect the attitude implied in much of the literature that compliance with expectations and norms indicates internalisation and approval, and is thus seen to be productive, whereas behaviour that challenges, confronts or rejects can be disruptive, delaying or obstructive, thus seen to be counter-productive.

What space is there for some forms of student protest to be seen as 'positive' and 'productive', especially as we encourage students to become critical thinkers and to be responsible, engaged citizens? Is there space to imagine a spectrum of student activism where, for example, boycotting and picketing is not always 'negative' and 'counter-productive'?

Through her research, Sonnenberg (2017: 269) found that, after the major fee increases introduced in 2010, for most UK students 'educational social identity was more significantly defined in terms of being consumers' when compared to students who started their studies before university fees tripled. For those students who buy into the student-as-consumer model of higher education, convincing them to participate as obedient neoliberal subjects may be easy because as customers they can assume a sense of power and control within the system. 'Students in HE [higher education] now certainly seem to have an awareness of their "customer rights" which are also made salient through universities' own feedback processes' (Sonnenberg 2017: 271). Yet, as Fielding (2001) has suggested, the exercise of eliciting student evaluations of their learning experience may merely serve to maintain existing power structures. Some student engagement and student experience discourses may contribute to an illusion of student power through student voice. Completing their course evaluations and their NSSE or NSS may allow students to believe themselves to be the evaluators of the goods they have purchased: the knowledge they have learned and the degrees they have earned (Danvers and Gagnon 2014). According to Williams, 'lecturers and students, presented as service users and service providers, appear pitted against each other with competing interests. There is a presumed need for an external regulating body to protect the interests of "vulnerable" consumers against "exploitative academics"' (2013: 49), and Morley argues that 'quality assurance could operate to make students more docile; by transforming them into consumers, they become more governable' (2003: 92). In the neoliberal academy, students are less the consumer and more the commodity. The more obediently they perform neoliberal forms of student engagement by ticking boxes on surveys and the less trouble they cause by wilfully protesting, then the better 'value for money' they are as a product of the university.

Staying young, becoming monstrous
Academia requires students to be mature enough to choose to pursue a university degree and wise enough to recognise whether the benefits of higher education outweigh the challenges of taking on student debt. Students are responsible, legal adults when they sign their loan documents and enrol on their courses. However, university administrations may still position themselves within an outdated 'father knows best' or 'in loco parentis' decision-making model (Danvers and Gagnon 2014). When the student voice, raised in protest, is not recognised as the voice of a reasonable, credible adult, then their concerns may be easily dismissed as those of a petulant child. Sukarieh and Tannock (2014: 114) have described the situation thus:

> A normative expectation has been promoted by governments, employers and educational institutions that young people should no longer expect to be able to achieve full adult status, independence, autonomy and well-being by the conclusion of their teenage years; rather, these are deferred, as young people are expected to enter into a prolonged period of transition that can last well into their 20s and even 30s. … The model of an ever-escalating educational arms race suggests a possible future in which the extension of youth upward in age will continue indefinitely with no clear upper limit.

In order to explore the limits and edges of student engagement, I must consider a question that researchers have asked before me (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014): when do 'young adults' transition to full adulthood? This question is especially relevant for understanding why media discourses continue to construct students as childish and irresponsible when they participate in political protest.

In the days following the Referendum in June 2016, the London School of Economics conducted a poll amongst voters. The findings were reported in *The Guardian* under the headline 'Poll reveals young Remain voters reduced to tears by Brexit result' (Helm 2016): 'When asked how they felt towards people who voted the opposite way to them, 67 per cent of young people aged 18–39 said that they felt angry, 72 per cent frustrated and 61 per cent "disgusted"'. Not only does the headline suggest that young voters have been 'reduced to tears', an emotional response associated with children, but the article defines young people as ages 18–39, which means that full adulthood must begin sometime from age 40 onwards.

After a series of news headlines suggested that millennials were to blame for 'killing' certain industries and traditions, the phrase "Millennials are killing" trended on Twitter in the summer of 2016. Pop culture media outlets compiled lists of the things that millennials have supposedly 'killed', including suits, wine, performance reviews, cereal, relationships, corner offices, and the napkin industry (Akbar and Regna 2016; Hogan 2016). At the same time, in the summer of 2016, Furedi (2016) reported that in the U.K. 'by the time they reached 30, almost two-thirds of baby boomers owned their home. That figure drops to 42 per cent in the millennial generation'. Not only that, but British millennials are spending about 488 per cent more on rent by the age of 30 than their parents did by the same age (Furedi 2016). The fact that fewer millennials are able to achieve certain milestones, such as living on their own or purchasing a home, is positioned as a wilful choice through media and social discourses that suggest that millennials are a 'lazy cohort of entitled and narcissistic brats – the proverbial Generation Me', as Pomeroy and Handke (2015) critiqued within their article titled 'The most entitled generation isn't millennials. It's baby boomers'.

Ahmed wrote: 'When a structural problem becomes diagnosed in terms of the will, then individuals become the problem: individuals become the cause of problems deemed their own' (2014: 7). It is the illusion of choice that allows young people to be constructed as the cause of the problems they face, ignoring rising student debt (National Union of Students 2015, 2016); unemployment and underemployment (Schmuecker 2014); pay gaps by gender (Lips 2013), race (Trade Union Congress 2016), social class (Wakeling and Savage 2015), and sexuality (Drydakis 2014); rising rent and living costs (Hirsch 2015); and wages that are no longer liveable (Hirsch 2015). Systemic, structural problems become easily blamed on wilful youth, on individuals who are in deficit, on 'adolescents who refuse to become adults' (Bauman 2000: 37). If 'young people' are the problem to be solved and the time frame of 'young' adulthood continues extending ever upwards, then at what age can student activists and protestors expect that their critiques, their dissent against the current state of our political, economic and social worlds will be taken seriously? When will their rage be seen as reasonable?

In another post-Referendum article published in the *Financial Times*, the headline read: 'Young people feel betrayed by Brexit but gave up their voice' and the subheading suggested that 'many millennials failed to turn out to vote in the referendum', even though the article was published before accurate data had been calculated about voter turnout from specific voting populations (Khalaf 2016). The journalist admitted that 'the demographics of the U.K. favour the older vote: around 18 per cent of the population is 65 and over whilst only 10.5 per cent are between 18 and 25' and suggested that some young voters may have been disadvantaged by the timing of the Referendum if they were registered to vote where they attend university, since the vote was held whilst most university students would be home for the summer. Yet she still chastised young voters, referring to them as 'Britain's disgruntled youth' and suggesting they may have 'failed to grasp what was at stake' or that 'they simply could not be bothered to express an opinion that required more than clicking a "like" button'. The journalist wrote that she had 'sympathy for their hurt feelings', an

infantilising turn of phrase, and concluded the article by suggesting that young people's rage is only reasonable when expressed in the voting booth and not during protest:

> Rebellious spirits tend to flare when protesting against social injustice or standing up to the established order; scepticism tends to set in when a government asks for backing. It is only now that their vision of the future has been taken away that the young are responding with rage. But as they mourn the outcome and lament a democratic experiment, they might consider the lesson of June 23: next time, show up at the polls.

Why are young protestors and young voters imagined as separate, divergent groups? Why is the wagging finger pointed at young people rather than at an election system that, by the journalist's own admission, disenfranchised young people who were registered to vote where they attend university? For those young people who did choose to abstain from voting, why is their abstention attributed to 'like-button-laziness'? Is there space for us to consider that media discourses that trivialise young people contribute to why young people may not believe that their voices are heard, may not believe that their political concerns are considered legitimate, may not believe that their participation in the democratic process, through voting, is as valued as that of 'adult' voters?

Ahmed illuminated that 'the word demonstrate shares its root with the word monster (from the Latin monstrum). … To demonstrate is to be involved in the creation of ominous signs. Together bodies become monstrous' (2014: 162). In her book, *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed (2014: 62) explores the history of education, from as far back as the 1600s through to modern times, as a space where 'willfulness', which is seen as synonymous with disobedience and stubbornness, is something that must be punished: 'Obedience is so important that all education is actually nothing other than learning how to obey' (Sulzer 1748, cited in Ahmed 2014: 65). To be willful is to be like a spoiled child who needs to be reprimanded, and 'to be identified as willful is to become a problem' (Ahmed 2014: 3). The willful activist student must be disciplined into submission and obedient civility or face consequences such as criminal charges (Danvers and Gagnon 2014), revocation of their right to citizenship within the academy (Danvers and Gagnon 2014), or revocation of their citizenship within their nation (Millhiser 2016).

Within a blog post, Ahmed (2015; original emphasis) wrote that 'what protestors are protesting *about* can be ignored when protestors are assumed to be suffering from too much will; they are assumed to be opposing something because they are *being oppositional*'. As students continue to be infantilised and trivialised within media discourses, their reasons for engaging in activism or protest are easily dismissed because they are seen as young people and not adults. They are deemed willful and, thus, their rage is unreasonable, their dissent is disobedient.

Within her book *Revolting Subjects*, Tyler (2013) explores different notions of revolting, including which bodies are constructed as unwelcome and therefore are subjected to control, stigma and censure, as well which bodies are engaged in active resistance and dissent against forms of disenfranchisement and social injustices. Tyler (2013: 7) writes:

> One effect of the neoliberal political consensus is that people's capacity to protest effectively against the state we are in has been eroded as the acceptable means for formal and democratic protest are practically non-existent. As the aggressive policing of recent student protests against austerity measures has revealed, in contemporary Britain protest itself has been incrementally criminalized.

Through dominant neoliberal media discourses, as well as through student engagement discourses, distinctions are drawn 'not only between desirable and undesirable – or monstrous – youth behaviours but between desirable and undesirable youth identities' (Black, Gray and Leahy 2016: 165). It is not just the ways that the actions of student protestors are constructed that interests me, but also the ways that protesting bodies are constructed differently, depending upon their intersecting identities, as I explore within the data analysis that follows. I must question not only whether student protest may be recognised as a legitimate form of student engagement. I must also ask: What forms of protest may be seen as acceptable and why? Whose participation in protest is encouraged and under what circumstances? Whose rage is seen as reasonable or unreasonable? Whose dissent is seen as obedient or disobedient? What forms of protest and which student protestors are positioned as more monstrous?

Identifying key moments
In order to explore the ways in which student activists are constructed through dominant media discourses, I have focused on the media coverage of selected key student activism moments in 2010 and 2016. Coverage of two of the 2010 national demonstrations and protests against rising tuition fees, the first held on 10 November (organised by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the University and College Union (UCU)) and the second held on 24 November (organised by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts), was selected. From 2016, coverage of student opposition to the proposed introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the related boycott of the NSS by the NUS, and coverage of the 19 November United for Education national demonstration organised by the NUS and the UCU were selected.

The articles represent a variety of national publications with a range of political perspectives. In total, sixty-one articles published during 2010 and 2016 covering the chosen key activist moments and issues from eight national news sources (*The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Observer* and *The Daily Telegraph*) were analysed. Additionally, since national news coverage of the 19 November 2016 demonstration was limited, the articles explored included coverage from *Al Jazeera* and the *Belfast Telegraph*.

The key moments were selected because of the contrast between the 2010 activism, which included property damage and arrests, and the 2016 activism, which included the NUS campaign for students to boycott the NSS and a national demonstration that did not include destruction like the 2010 demonstrations but that also did not yield the same level of media attention. Media discourses infantilised student activists during the chaos of the 2010 moments and the calm of the 2016 moments. No matter what form of protest students engage in, whether chaotic or calm, the criticism remains the same: their dissent is always disobedient.

I explored the data through discourse analysis in order to identify the ways in which 'discourse (re)produces social domination, that is the power abuse of one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively resist that abuse' (van Dijk 2009: 63). Illustrative quotes from the data are presented to highlight themes that emerged around the ways in which the media constructs student activists and, in comparison, the ways in which student activists present themselves and their activism. I focus my analysis on the themes revealed within the data and not on any specific individuals. Analytically, I have chosen to explore the data through a process of weaving together thematic threads with threads from relevant theoretical and critical perspectives (a process also described as 'plugging in'; see, for example, Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 2013).

Constructing student activists through media discourses
My analysis is divided into four subsections. In the first, I explore the impact of visual media discourses on the construction of student activists. In the second, I illuminate the gender bias in media coverage of the 2010 protests. In the third, I reveal the contradictions in media coverage of the social class of protestors who engaged in destructive acts. Finally, in the fourth I challenge the oft repeated insinuation that under-represented students are 'dumbing down' the academy, and I suggest that there is space to consider acts of protest as legitimate methods of engaging in political and social critique.

'Everyone's terrors and disturbing desires'
Following the 10 November 2010 demonstration, nearly all of the mainstream national U.K. newspapers ran the same front-page photo: that of a protestor dressed all in black with a hood obscuring his face, kicking in an already smashed window at Millbank Tower with the flames and smoke of a flare behind him (Gabbatt 2010). In full colour, the image dominated the front pages of *The Daily Mail, The Metro, The Guardian, The Sun, the Financial Times, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, and the Daily Express*. A black and white version of the image was used on the front page of *The Independent*. Regardless of whether the written coverage of the demonstration was balanced or even sympathetic to the cause of preventing the tripling of university tuition fees, that so many newspapers chose to print the provocative image of the faceless protestor engaged in a destructive criminal act contributed to the construction of all of the student activists as violent and dangerous. Many of the headlines further strengthened that negative construction. 'Thuggish and disgraceful' read *The Times* headline. 'Disgrace of the student hooligans' ran on *The Daily Express* front page. *The Sun* just chose one big word for their headline: 'Brainless'. Ahmed (2014: 165) illuminated:

> The violence of or in protesting is often called 'mindless'. We learn from this description: perhaps actions are called 'mindless' when we don't like the content of other people's minds, when we don't want to hear what it is they are saying.

With an estimated 50,000 protestors gathered for the demonstration (Gabbatt 2010), media attention was focused not on the peaceful multitude but on the destructive few. Within an article in *The Guardian* about the infamous photograph, Jones (2010a) asked whether his industry should turn a critical gaze upon itself for splashing this image across nearly every front page:

> This photograph from Wednesday's student protest is the image that has been chosen by many papers to illustrate what was intended, and was experienced by most students, as a peaceful march. Is it political manipulation to choose this picture instead of, say, a peaceful shot of smiling placard-wavers to put on front pages? Are the media exercising their nasty arts to make students look like a mob? No. This image has made the front pages because it is exciting. Its violence is liberating to contemplate, in a dangerous, Dionysian way. … This is not a scary picture, a propaganda image or cheap sensationalism but a thrilling, truthful picture that brings everyone's terrors and disturbing desires out into the open, onto the usually so peaceful streets.

I disagree with Jones where he says that the choice to run that image on the front page, and that image alone, is not politically manipulative. Discourse, including, visual discourse, is powerful and has an impact. The visual choices made in the newsroom should be as ethically scrutinised as the written text (Keith, Schwalbe, and William Silcock 2006; Newton 2001). Sensational images sell print newspapers or become clickbait to boost revenues for online

publications. The pursuit of truth in reporting should be prioritised over profit and should be as balanced as the pursuit of justice. Even if readers have a desire to see the dangerous, if only the criminal activities of a minority of protestors are on display on the front pages of nearly every major publication, it becomes easier for all protestors to become constructed as criminal.

'The girls went to war'

Three of the articles covering the 24 November 2010 demonstration focused on the involvement of female protestors (Camber et. al. 2010; Harris 2010; Jones 2010b). *The Daily Mail* articles (Camber et. al. 2010; Harris 2010) suggested that 'Rioting girls became the disturbing new face of violent protest' and that the demonstration was the day 'the girls went to war'. Camber et. al. (2010) highlighted a single female protestor who attempted to convince her protesting peers not to engage in property damage, indicating that she was 'praised [for] her intervention' and that her efforts to encourage good behaviour made her a 'proper student protest role model'. Similarly, *The Guardian* (Jones 2010b) article focused on praising a group of female protestors who intervened to prevent further property damage to a police van.

Two of the articles largely focused on the female protestors' appearance. *The Guardian* (Jones 2010b) article described 'the schoolgirls who brought attacks on the police vehicle to an end by standing around it with linked hands in flower-power poses' as 'angelic' with 'their school ties … knotted around their heads as if dressing up as the Woodstock generation for a classroom history play'. One of *The Daily Mail* articles (Harris 2010) opens with the line 'They were mostly young, bright and pretty, the kind of girls who would ordinarily make their parents proud'. The protestors were described as 'doing each other's make-up', having 'painted obscenities on their faces', wearing 'short skirts and trendy scarves' and bringing a 'feminine touch' to the demonstration. Focusing on female protestors' appearance allowed for their participation in property destruction to be presented as surprising and out-of-character:

> Almost as soon as some mindless thugs began trashing a police van abandoned in the middle of Whitehall, the girls went to battle. From nowhere, it seemed, they produced spray cans and indelible markers to cover the van in graffiti.

The activists were described as 'the Facebook and iPhone generation who posed for souvenir photographs against the backdrop of carnage', belittling and delegitimising their reasons for engaging in the demonstration.

All three articles rely on traditional gendered norms about women as peaceful, docile, obedient and well-behaved. Within *The Guardian* coverage (Jones 2010b), the female protestors were praised for peacefully preventing destruction and 'showing us … that this is not just about rage. It is a defiant stand for youth and hope'. Defiance must be docile and rage must be tamed for it to be reasonable. In contrast, within one of *The Daily Mail* articles (Harris 2010), female protestors were chastised for joining 'mindless thugs' in riotous chaos, as if such actions were 'unlady-like'. Within the other *The Daily Mail* article (Camber et. al. 2010), one female protestor who 'stood up to the mob' and tried to convince her peers not to further cause destruction to property is lauded as 'fearless'.

> The gendering of will thus also implies the gendering of willfulness. … It might be that certain actions are permitted for boys precisely because they are more encouraged to acquire a will of their own. Similar actions made by differently gendered subjects thus have different consequences (Ahmed 2014: 90).

While these three articles focused on the figure of the female protestor, out of all 61 articles reviewed from 2010 and 2016, there were no equivalent articles that focused solely on male participation in protest, and certainly no articles referred to male protestors bringing a 'masculine touch' or male protestors dressing up as if engaged in a play rather than in a protest. Perhaps this is because, as Ahmed (2014) articulated, boys and men are encouraged to be willful and are expected to be disruptive. Whilst there are direct quotes from female protestors in both of *The Daily Mail* articles (Camber et. al. 2010; Harris 2010), illuminating their reasons for participating in the demonstration, their intentions are undermined when both articles suggest that the activists were more interested in getting a good 'photo for Facebook' than in effecting change. Their youth and their gender make their rage unrecognisable and their dissent easy to dismiss.

'From a third-rate institution'

In the aftermath of the 10 November 2010 demonstration, two journalists tracked down one of the protestors who had been caught on camera throwing a chair through a window at Millbank Tower (Pollard and Sullivan 2010). Their article described the student protestor as 'posh' and 'well-spoken, middle-class', and it focused on the fact that he lived with his parents in a 'Victorian terraced home' in an expensive borough of London. When confronted and asked to answer for his behaviour, the student offered the following response: 'I would call myself working class, but my parents have done very well for themselves'.

Coverage of the arrest of another protestor also focused on his affluent background: 'A student from a wealthy family was arrested yesterday after a fire extinguisher was hurled from the roof of Tory headquarters during Wednesday's riots' (Greenhill 2010). His parents' home was described as a 'large country house worth up to £1 million, set in expansive grounds'. The wealthy backgrounds of these students become newsworthy because they do not fit the normative media narrative that suggests that those from the 'working class' – as one of the offenders offers when he suggests that he 'would call himself working class' to try to justify his behaviour – are the violent troublemakers (Ahmed 2014; Tyler 2013). As another article suggested, the property destruction and violence could not possibly have been committed by real student activists who are attending 'proper' universities:

> The criminals who smashed up the building were from a completely different group than the thousands of students I saw earlier in the day. … I'd be surprised if many of them were full-time students in the proper academic sense of the word. More likely, they are anarchists – perhaps with a student card, from a third-rate institution they never visit, that cloaks their criminal violence with the figleaf of principled protest (Mount 2010).

The media coverage that revealed that some of the most violent acts committed during the 10 November takeover of Millbank Tower were allegedly perpetrated by privileged, wealthy students contradicts the media coverage that accused students from 'third-rate institutions' of committing the crimes:

> The civilized and educated subjects remove themselves from the very signs of willfulness, from the capricious and the impulsive, as a way of distancing themselves from the lower ranks. … The less civilized adults (working class, racial others, women, and of course some embody more than one than category of less) are thus figured not only as childlike but *as* willful children. (Ahmed 2014: 94)

There is a social class divide between those whose engagement in activism is recognised as 'proper' and those who may be dismissed as deviant.

There is space here to consider the ways in which dominant media discourses shape which forms of student activism are a risk for some students and not for others based on the identities of the students. For example, had I been arrested whilst engaging in political protest as a student, I know my working-class background and my status as the daughter of a single mother would have been included in the media coverage, which would have limited and restrained how I did or did not engage in activism. As an undergraduate, I also relied on three part-time jobs to fund my studies and pay for my living expenses, so the risk of losing them limited both my capacity for student engagement on all ends of the spectrum that Trowler (2010) has suggested. A student's race, class, gender and other identities impact upon whether engaging in particular forms of activism is a risk or not. The development of a critical student engagement discourse, distinctly different from normative, neoliberal student engagement discourses, may provide a more nuanced, intersectional understanding of the edges of engagement.

'Articulate your criticism'

One of the articles in *The Telegraph* covering student activism in 2016, specifically the NUS- and UCU-organised demonstration, focused on a survey of students that revealed that '68 per cent wished to see more contact hours and coursework feedback in person, rather than email' (Roberts 2016a). Whilst fewer than half of the survey respondents (44 per cent) indicated that they were willing to pay higher tuition for 'more tailored teaching', the headline chosen for the article was 'Students "willing to pay more for tailored teaching" at university'. First, the headline is misleading, since the majority of student respondents were not 'willing to pay more'. Second, there is no evidence to support the implication within the article that higher fees will lead to increased contact hours. The journalist, who was also an undergraduate student at the time of the article's publication, further suggested that university teaching and research quality had suffered as a result of 'diversity':

> The findings come amid concerns that Government pressure to focus on diversity and recruiting from disadvantaged backgrounds has caused universities to "take their eye off the ball" when it comes to teaching and research' (Roberts 2016a).

Under-represented students, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and working-class students, are scapegoated as the reason that higher education is deteriorating: 'Students from non-traditional backgrounds are frequently constructed as a risk to universities and to the state that invests in them' (Hinton-Smith 2012: 12). They are blamed for 'lowering the bar' and 'dumbing down' the academy (Burke 2012): 'If chavs are imagined as revolting subjects conceived in the pathological culture of council estates, then the neoliberal university is the spatial and imaginary antithesis to this abject zone' (Tyler 2013: 166). Fingers point to under-represented students when academic standards are discussed because they have supposedly polluted or poisoned the system and they are somehow to blame for poor and worsening standards (Burke 2012). This article, in *The Telegraph*, suggested that students would gladly 'pay more' to avoid studying alongside the revolting likes of students who come from under-represented backgrounds, as I did.

The Telegraph published an editorial article by the same student journalist three days later (Roberts 2016b) in which she suggested that the NUS was 'busy losing friends again', a childish castigation for its campaign to encourage students to boycott or sabotage the NSS in protest against the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The article concludes with scolding words:

Don't like the TEF proposals? Articulate your criticism – of which there should be plenty of with this scheme – instead of angrily boycotting and exiting the debate altogether. Acts of 'sabotage' have no place in debate.

However, whilst the journalist encouraged students to 'articulate your criticism', *The Telegraph* only provided a platform for this particular opinion on the matter, which means that only this one perspective was articulated through this publication. The NUS, as the elected union representing all university students in the U.K., was not consulted on the proposal to introduce the TEF. What might a union choose to do when it is not consulted on major changes that threaten to negatively impact its members? There is a long history of union protests and strikes in the name of equity and justice. Whilst dominant media discourses might chastise student activists, we must find space on the edges of engagement to recognise 'angrily boycotting' and 'acts of sabotage' as legitimate methods for students to 'articulate your criticism'.

Concluding with a question

Through the neoliberal lens, student activism is often constructed as an unwelcomed nuisance both within the media, as explored within this article, and within the academy, as explored previously (Danvers and Gagnon 2014). Student activists are performing outside of the acceptable limits set by certain student engagement discourses that reinforce neoliberal norms by relegating protest activities to the negative end of the engagement spectrum (Trowler 2010). Dominant discourses within the media construct student activism as negative as well and position student protestors as a problem to be solved. However, perhaps some of their political engagement through activism can occupy positive space on the edges of engagement within a more critical student engagement framework. In a blog post titled 'Against Students', Ahmed (2015) wrote:

What do I mean by 'against students'? By using this expression, I am trying to describe a series of speech acts, which consistently position students, or at least specific kinds of students, as a threat to education, to free speech, to civilisation: we might even say, to life itself. … Students have become an error message, a beep, beep, that is announcing the failure of a whole system. …We need to support, stand with, and stand by, those students who are fighting to survive hostile institutions.

Ahmed is challenging the depoliticised notions of student voice and student engagement. Academia cannot shirk responsibility for the part it has played in creating these uncertain times, the kind of world that (some) student activists have been rallying against. We have shaped the minds and values of the leaders, who are making decisions that impact our world, and of the citizens, who are choosing those leaders at the polls. Even citizens who do not end up in our university classrooms, they have been in the classrooms of the teachers that we have educated. For those who do not cast their ballots, we must take responsibility to turn the critical gaze on the education system, on the voting system and on the political parties if we hope to encourage the disenfranchised to exercise their right to vote. In this post-U.K. Referendum, post-US election world, where the threat of violence and exclusion against so many citizens, including our students, is all too real, not all of our students will get the chance to return to our classrooms and be engaged. Let these uncertain times become the space in which we finally, collectively, resist the neoliberal onslaught within and beyond higher education. Let us broaden our understanding of student engagement so that we reward the critical thinkers who raise their placards in protest and who enter the voting booths. We must question why the media and our institutions have become so hostile towards our student

activists rather than encouraging political engagement and critical thinking. What does this hostility tell us about our roles as academics in moments of dissent or disharmony – are we with students or against them?

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Notes

[1] Gallinat and Garforth, this issue, offer a brief description of the political and institutional reforms of UK higher education that included the fee increase introduced in 2010.

[2] For a detailed critical discussion of the methodological status and value of NSS and NSSE scaling and measurement, see Payne, this issue.