Coloring in the Altmetric Donut

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Publication date:
2019

Document version
Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 25. Dec. 2019
2. The Case

A little while ago a colleague told us a story that made us stand up and listen: Our university put a new portal for our Current Research Information System into operation. The portal displays both the PlumX flower and the Altmetric donut. Our colleague wondered what that would mean for researcher behavior and brought up the topic over lunch with a visiting professor. Much to his surprise the professor was very much aware of these altmetric indicators and told him that she had been optimizing against them for several years. To do that she had created a series of fake profiles on all relevant Social Media platforms. Whenever she published she would start tweeting and retweeting, posting and sharing with herself boosting her Altmetric scores. She furthermore argued that her private Social Media echo chamber appeared to have leaks: Because whenever she started up her echo chamber it appeared the Social Media platforms somehow detected the intense activities surrounding her new publication and forwarded her postings, making the news of her publication spread faster.

We were quite puzzled. So, after publication of an article on Predatory Publishing [1], which some of us co-authored, we sent out an e-mail to our colleagues asking them to like and retweet a tweet containing the DOI of the article. In less than 24 hours the article skyrocketed into the top 5 percent of all research outputs scored by Altmetric of the same age.

We want to study how to inflate the Altmetric donut using Social Media. To do that we published an editorial in LIBER Quarterly [2] with the specific intent to follow the spread of its DOI via the Altmetric Explorer. We cannot use a genuine research article, as that would be unethical. It is our aim to study how simple encouragement of peers, friends and fellows works. We will study the effects to get an idea of how friendly tweeting of DOI’s spreads and which platforms are the most efficient.

4. The Results

4.1 Interaction breakdown

So far, Altmetric has seen 111 tweets from 73 users, with an upper bound of 231,881 followers.

What do altmetric scores mean and how easy is it to game them? I’ve been following the buzz about new “alternative metrics” and came across this editorial.

4.2 Geographical breakdown

4.3 Demographic breakdown

5. The Conclusions

It is clear that the Altmetric Donut is not so easily manipulated. Altmetric has taken many steps to limit the Donut to verifiable, trackable sources, excluding Sina Weiba, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, much of Facebook and most blogs. This leaves only 7 colors that could potentially be manipulated. Even though the authors and their peers have posted the DOI of the LIBER editorial on YouTube, StackExchange Academia Q&A and Reddit, these interactions have not (yet) been picked up by the Altmetric algorithms. Only the grey color for Wikipedia and the blue color for Twitter have been successfully colored in. By far, the most effective way to inflate the Altmetric Score is by nudging peers on Twitter.

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