Simple Resistance is Not an Option:
Playing and Transforming the Indicator Game

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I am heartened by the thoughtfulness, passion, and analytical insight in this collection of essays about the "indicator game" (Fochler and de Rijcke 2017). Contributors (see Bal 2017; Irwin 2017; McHardy 2017) rightly recognize the threat to scholarly diversity and heterogeneity in higher education more broadly resulting from the widespread institutionalization of metrics. Several authors helpfully highlight how existing metrics don't allow us to measure qualities (e.g. patient thinking) we believe valuable (see Felt 2017; Muller 2017; Wouters 2017) and lead colleagues to avoid engaging in endeavors that don't "count" (e.g. journal reviewing) (see Vann 2017). At the same time, some authors advocate counting practices (e.g. public engagement) that are often undervalued (Muller 2017; Wouters 2017) and urge bold experimentation (e.g. with new publication forms) (McHardy 2017). As the editor of *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* I am pleased about how these papers turned out. As a later career STS scholar, I am reassured by the insights of my younger colleagues and their creative proposals.

In my brief essay, rather than focus on very specific details of the contributions to this thematic collection, I would like to build on it. What I write comes from my perspective as a scholar of higher education (see, e.g., Kleinman 2015; Kleinman and Osley Thomas 2016, 2014), an academic administrator and, dare I say, a senior member of the STS and higher education community more broadly. The scholarly and educational world in which I came of age (or at least my perception of it) has changed, and I have changed to. When I began my graduate work in 1985, I came with a perception of higher education as a relatively autonomous space for debating new—sometimes farfetched—ideas and as a site for developing the thinking skills of young people and preparing them for lives of engaged citizenship.

Things were changing in US higher education when I started my PhD, but arguably the major public research university I attended in the US was still guided by a postwar ethos. Higher education was considered a public good that should be supported by citizen paid taxes. This included the education provided within its walls and the research undertaken. While US higher education was not immune from attack (witness McCarthyism), my reading of the historical record suggests little challenge to its virtues and apparently little felt need by members of the academic community to persistently and publicly argue for higher education's values.

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But the 1980s were also a time of anti-tax crusades in the US and fiscal state crisis. Calls for restraint in public spending grew louder, as the United States' place in the world economy became less unequivocally dominant (Kleinman 2015). In the face of slower economic growth and tight government budgets—where university graduates are not assured economic stability and institutions of higher education compete aggressively for funding and students—efforts to institutionalize metrics in all areas of higher education were widespread and were successful. Today, US universities are ranked (as are universities across the globe) and provide measures of graduation rates, post-graduation debt and alumni salary ostensibly to allow students to make informed decisions about institutions they would like to attend. Students and their parents want to be assured that they are getting what they paid for. Administrators chase rankings, often built in part on faculty metrics, in order to stabilize their institution in the face of intense competition for limited resources (Espeland and Sauter 2016).

The questions (as appropriately asked by the authors in this collection) are: what have metrics done to higher education and what should we do in response? Arguably, in the US and elsewhere, the spread and institutionalization of metrics have reinforced the idea that education is a commodity, bolstered a narrow sense of what valuable scholarship is, and shaped the focus of academic administration and scholars' everyday, and broader career, practices. And, as several of the authors here (e.g. Bal 2017; Felt 2017; Irwin 2017) suggest, the dominance of existing research-related metrics threaten to stifle creative work and radical experimentation.

What then should we do in the face of growing pervasiveness of metrics? With several authors here, I don't believe we can simply reject the "game" (see Irwin 2017). We must play. This means junior faculty must publish in high impact factor journals (as discussed by McHardy 2017 and Vann 2017), and institutional survival likely means that we must work to raise the stature of the programs of which we are a part in terms of established measures. But, again, likely many authors here, I don't believe we can stop there. (Re)education of those who use and accept metrics is crucial. Internally, we must talk to our colleagues across fields. In this context, Bal rightly notes that existing research metrics fail to take account of field structures, field-specific citing practices, and so forth.

In my experience, those scholars most advantaged by the existing measures of research productivity and impact haven't thought much about the narrow and reductive character of research metrics. During my years at a major research university, I have repeatedly been struck by how little humanists know and understand about the character, culture and structure of the scientists who live nearby, and similarly how little those same scientists know about what their humanists colleagues do and value.

To change metrics or their relative importance, better "cross (academic) cultural" understanding is essential. Mutual understanding and alliances across research cultures and fields may create the basis for developing and institutionalizing a broader set of metrics than those that currently predominate. In my experience, too often we live in silos, which allows reductive metrics to stand without question and undermines the potential for a rich and nuanced intellectual culture. In my time in academic administration, I have repeatedly headed committees with members from across academic fields, and I have been amazed at how surprised

colleagues have been by what their counterparts across a cultural divide take for granted, and I have been heartened at how open they have been—once they realize this—to experimentation—to, for example, proposing to administrators alternative metrics or supporting new publication genres.

These experiences allow scholars to see what colleagues in other fields value and why. In the simplest case, scientists learn about the value of books in the humanities and how many research-related metrics do not include books. Humanists learn how much it costs to operate a molecular biology laboratory, and why research grants play such a prominent role in assessing the impact of researchers in certain fields. These experiences, in turn, could allow scholars across fields to build alliances and advocate for a broader array of metrics.

Furthermore, in my experience, many university leaders do not have as narrow and reductive a vision as their pursuit of university and program rankings might suggest. They too have to play the game, but if we can find ways to build, for example, the status of key academic programs, according to existing metrics, *while* experimenting, these administrators are often open to helping to maintain "bewildering spaces" (McHardy 2017) and building novel interdisciplinary initiatives.

In the US certainly, many of the metrics we find problematic are used to satisfy non-academics and politicians. Again, while we may not be able to escape the prevalent use of metrics as a way of pointing to contributions our institutions make to local economies or student debt-to-earning ratios, we need to repeatedly and publicly make arguments for the broad cultural virtues of "basic" research—from literary studies to high energy physics—and for how and why post-secondary education is for more than occupational preparation. When talking to students and parents, we need to explain how and why "critical thinking" is important and why it is so difficult to measure.

There is a broader, public argument to be made here, too, namely that metrics, create a false sense of objectivity and certainty. This is obvious to STS scholars, but not to everyone. We must write for public audiences and speak before them and explain the limitations of metrics and explain why much of what we value as societies is not easy to measure. I believe we—and our predecessors—have contributed in some ways, in the US for sure, to the current moment. We assumed the value of what we do and failed to consistently and persistently advocate for it among our fellow citizens.

All of this said, I don't believe metrics (or even the environment that created them) can be blamed for all that is "wrong" with higher education and the scholarly realm. Several authors here talk about how metrics stifle risk taking and interdisciplinary experimentation. I suspect that is true, but my experience is that in the US a seven-year tenure clock contributes to conservative research practices too. And well before metrics in higher education were pervasive, as a junior scholar, I was told that only peer-reviewed journal articles "count." Conference presentations, organizing workshops, writing op-eds, and reviewing for journals don't count. In my view, we should have been working to alter these norms well before the spread of academic metrics. Now they are even more fully institutionalized and taken for granted, and we need to

work to expand notions of what "counts," and we must do this work with colleagues, academic leaders and the broader public.

And what about *ESTS*? I would love to have radically experimental junior scholars publish in this journal, but absent an impact factor at this stage, I would always encourage these colleagues to hedge their bets. Please publish here, but also make sure you publish in recognized and ranked journals, if that is what your institutions recognize as indicative of your success. I hope we can all have it both ways. We recognize established norms and constraints. *ESTS* needs to and will probably one day be able to participate in the "impact factor" system; we maintain rigorous peer review standards. But we also want to push the boundaries of these established norms and practices. We offer a set of publication genres that are not common in the academic journal world, and we seek to expand our audience by doing so. And we are open to other experiments, non-traditional forms of representation, and different kinds of debates and engagements. I hope you will stick with us and push us in new directions.

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Biography

In addition to serving as editor of *Engaging Science, Technology and Society*, Daniel Lee Kleinman is Associate Provost for Graduate Affairs and Professor of Sociology at Boston University. He is the co-author most recently (with Sainath Suryanarayanan) of *Vanishing Bess: Science, Politics, and Honeybee Health.*

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