



# The social life of literacy education: how the 2018 #phonicsdebate is reshaping the field

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## Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the Reading Wars as a site of discursive struggle. Using a digital sociological account of online events associated with the 2018 Phonics Debate hosted by the Australian Centre for Educational Research and the think tank the Centre for Independent Studies, this paper works to illuminate and challenge contemporary understanding of the politics of literacy teaching. If educational researchers are to clarify the relationship between politics and literacy in the twenty-first century we must understand how boundaries are negotiated using digital tools and how the literacy professional community is imagined. Using a Bourdieu-facilitated digital sociology, this paper will present a case study of the 2018 Phonics Debate to illustrate how literacy researchers and cognitive scientists have used social media as a space to navigate, negotiate and reimagine the contours of the field of literacy itself.

**Keywords** #Phonicsdebate · Reading wars · Bourdieu · Digital sociology · Literacy

In recent years new battle lines have been drawn in the so-called Reading Wars, as the long-lived debate, that has been a key feature in the politics of literacy research in Australia and internationally, found new life on social media. The movement of the Reading Wars from academic texts and policy documents into the public domain on social media has allowed insight into the sociology of the Reading Wars. This includes the ability to see how the field of literacy teaching and research is navigated, negotiated, and reimaged by those who desire to change how literacy is taught in schools and universities. This paper presents a digital sociological interpretation of a recent 18-month period in the Reading Wars where parents, health academics and think tank personnel collectivised to subvert existing forms of education-based literacy research and teaching by engaging in highly strategic and dynamic attempts to

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redraw the lines of literacy professional affiliation and inclusion. Rather than treating the different “sides” of the debate as right or wrong, insider or outsider, this social life of the Reading Wars proposes that all interlocutors in the Reading Wars have developed a narrative of sociological transformation. Within the discursive tension that comes with transformation, a liminal space has emerged that now requires teachers of reading and writing to, politically and professionally, continuously re-evaluate what it is they do. Apart from giving new insight into the Australian Reading Wars, this digital sociology will allow us to re-evaluate our understanding of how socially mediated environments have transformed how education professional communities can work.

The underlying theoretical premise of this paper is that the Reading Wars constitute a site of discursive struggle, or a strategic negotiation of the parameters of the field. As such, an analysis of the boundaries of the debate is an analysis of the relationship between politics and literacy in the twenty-first century. This is because an understanding of how interlocutors negotiate the boundaries of the field of literacy research, as well as how those interlocutors imagine a professional community, can illuminate the conditions which brought about a recent disagreement, known on social media as the #phonicsdebate. Bourdieu (1993) saw the field of literary production (authorship, readership, critic, editor and publisher) as a site of struggle where the end goal is membership in a professional group. In this paper I remix Bourdieu’s ideas as a field of *literacy* production where education and health researchers, parents, teachers of reading and writing, health professionals, and “policy elites” (Savage, 2016) navigate, negotiate and reimagine what it means to be a teacher of reading and writing. As these interlocutors engage in contests and clashes of concepts they reveal just as much about the field as those seeking and determining admission.

This paper uses a qualitative critical network (Barnes, 2020) digital sociology that uses small data (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017) to bring together network theory and social media methodologies. In doing so, gateways are opened to identifying locations of contestation in the Reading Wars as well as the interlocutors negotiating membership of the literacy field. The research presented here identifies nodes and activities through which the discursive struggle moves, and the discourses and culture which represent the field for which membership is the purpose of that struggle (Ball, 2016). Furthermore, this paper will show the possibilities for digital sociology in education research that uses social media small data as a tool for inquiry.

In remixing Bourdieu’s field of literary production to become a field of literacy production, two key sociological questions emerge which will be used to interrogate the digital data and associated networks. Firstly, what does it mean for an academic literacy researcher to claim a role at the centre of literacy research and to take on the role of judge as to who gains admission to that field? Likewise, what does it mean for non-education researchers and literacy advocates to negotiate, navigate and reimagine a literacy research field that includes them? Negotiation of the parameters of that research field has been a continuous feature of the teaching of reading and writing since the policy sphere decided to use the term *literacy* rather than the separate terms, *reading* and *writing* (Green et al., 1997). Defining the field of literacy research required the negotiation, navigation, and reimagining of two reciprocal

fields—reading and writing—to become one field. Furthermore, once literacy became a *policy object* (Green et al., 1997) the field experienced cross-field effects (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008) as the policy sphere and media invited adjacent fields of research into the negotiation of the field of literacy. Social media has amplified this cross-field effect, ushering new powerful interlocutors into the field of literacy production.

## The field of literacy production

Bourdieu (1993) interrogated the sociology of literary knowledge by reversing established philosophical questions about how culture constitutes creative projects. He instead asked how a writer or artist comes to occupy a position in society. By examining what knowledge the writer had of the social conditions that produced the field they occupy and inquiring as to whether they renegotiated the structure and conditions of that field, Bourdieu (1993) sought to understand how they were able to claim membership of the literary field. His definition of a field of literary production states that “literary works are produced in a particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws” (p. 163). Bourdieu (1993) suggests that this social universe is independent from politics and the economy but that “demographic, economic or political events are always retranslated according to the specific logic of the field, and it is by this intermediary that they act on the logic of the development of works” (p. 164).

In this paper, I remix Bourdieu’s (1993) definition to consider the field of *literacy* production. Literacy exists within the field of education which, especially when questioning the ability of the citizenship to read and write, is intensely political and firmly connected to the economy (Ryan & Barton, 2020). Furthermore, as Rawolle and Lingard (2008) assert, education is subject to cross-field effects because the decisions made are strongly connected to policy which is also noticeably affected by media. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1993) definition I describe the field of literacy production to mean a *separate social universe that strategically negotiates its own laws of functioning in response to political and economic parameters imposed upon it*. The strategic negotiation of these laws is conducted at the point of *discursive struggles*. Knowing what creates the field is a form of capital acquired by those within the field. The adherence to and navigation of these agreed laws is how the field of literacy is produced.

A basic example of the discursive struggle that produces the field of literacy is seen in the negotiation of the role of literacy research and assessment practices. For example, in 2008 the policy sphere dictated that students in Australia be tested in literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. In this National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), students are required to show competence in spelling, traditionally a written skill, by identifying the correct spelling from a list of words that include misspellings, traditionally a reading skill. The reimagining of the field of literacy prompted reading and writing researchers to negotiate the collaboration of these skills in order to prepare students for a test which assesses an inaccurate representation of the skill. As standardised testing presents a limited

version of the nuance of spelling, shallow, but assessed, renderings of literacy come to dominate, deeper understandings of literacy become marginalised, and the limited, tested version of literacy develops into what is taught by teachers (Hayes et al., 2017). While the discursive struggle between complexity and testing has been present prior to 2008, the example is salient because NAPLAN forced the two fields into the public sphere together by dictating the high stakes need for teaching literacy that aligned with the national test (Hardy, 2015). It is in negotiating these fields of literacy production researchers have defined the laws and politics of what it is to teach literacy. This site of discursive struggle is the point where reading researchers from the field of cognitive science, not subject to the political and economic parameters that originally produced the field of literacy research, have negotiated admission into the field, and social media has become a vehicle for this negotiation.

So what happens when a field, not usually connected to education research but associated with reading research, attempts to negotiate entry into the field of literacy research? Stern's (2016) template for analysing communities of literary critics in the nineteenth century, enables the proposal of a theory of literacy's discursive boundary struggle. Stern examined how female critics, excluded from the development of literary criticism circles, actively sought out patronage, positions as gatekeepers of canonical works, and acted subversively to redefine the field of literary criticism. Such activities are mirrored in the digital data connected to the 2018 phonics debate. Firstly, the new interlocutors (cognitive scientists) began to interrupt the literacy research field (teacher educators) with alternative approaches to understanding the teaching of reading. These new approaches are drawn from the social universe (Bourdieu, 1993) of cognitive science, which has strategically negotiated its own laws and determined its own forms of capital separate to literacy research. Similar to Stern's (2016) literary critics, cognitive scientists and literacy researchers style the other as a rhetorical collective that works to subvert the agreed upon laws of the separate fields and associated capital necessary for enacting those laws. The established collective might accuse the other of being aggressive—but in doing so questions arise about what it means to claim the central role in the field and act as judge. Alternatively, the new collective might use "highly stylized" (Stern, 2016, p. 3) strategies, such as extensive use of social media and drawing on established relationships with policy makers, to redraw the lines of field—but we must question whether this will dismiss and erase important situated histories of the field. Rather than treating either "side" as right or wrong, this social life of the Reading Wars proposes that both sides are working within a "liminal space—navigating, negotiating, and reimagining the contour of the field" (Stern, 2016, p. 4) of literacy. As the interlocutors reflect on the field they are determined to enter or protect, the social forums are reinvented to facilitate new exchanges between the collectives. This paper argues that the digital realm has enabled a cross-field effect (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008) that aids in field transformation.

Furthermore, the field of literacy production is still engaged in absorbing discursive struggles from the field of reading, known as the Reading Wars. In effect, the so-called Reading Wars are a separate but connected discursive struggle to the field of literacy production where the interlocutors of that negotiation must navigate both the research into reading and the production of literacy as a policy object. It is

beyond the capacity of this paper to articulate in detail the long history of the points of negotiation in both discursive combats, but it is important to contextualise the Reading Wars before particularising the conditions and nodes of struggle in a recent formulation of the online phonics debate.

### Reading education as a site of discursive struggle

Literacy education has long been a site of discursive struggle with debate between different approaches to reading being over a century old. Castles et al. (2018) traced the so-called war over how to teach children to read standard English back to the nineteenth century when the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann, railed against explicitly teaching the relationship between letters and sounds. Pearson (2004) argues that the Reading Wars (in the United States) intensified when the whole-language approach, or the belief that children immersed in literature will learn to read, came to dominate curriculum policy in the 1980s. He argues that political forces which sought to privilege one approach to instruction over another made the process of teaching reading combative. He argued that the teaching of reading became the flagship of a performative pedagogical ideology that restricted teachers' perceived ability to use alternative approaches to the teaching of reading.

In Australia, where the empirical work reported in this article is oriented, Green et al. (1997) define literacy as an "object of policy, at the federal level" (p. 7). The authors explain how the political collapse of reading and writing into *literacy* effectively, drew the discursive struggle between scientific and socio-cultural approaches to reading education into the neo-rationalist debates that dominated schooling in Australia during the 1980s and 1990s. Green et al. (1997) describe how policy arguments linked low literacy levels with mass youth unemployment as a major failure in education. The authors claim that, consequently, reading failure became linked to Australian economic outcomes, ensuring the reading wars had longevity as long as Australia had economic downturn. Essentially, literacy *policy* shifted responsibility for broader socio-economic and cultural challenges away from government and directly onto schools.

In their attempt to bring the Reading Wars to a close in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Castles et al. (2018) published an explainer article and engaged in public advocacy through social media that explicitly outlined how psychological science has finally put to bed the belief that the teaching of reading can be a solely immersive process. The cognitive scientists argued that advancements in their field have demonstrated that English speakers learn to read the English language by making connections between sounds and letters and these connections must be explicitly taught. Central to this science is a concentrated effort to understand the brains of people with dyslexia, whose brains do not make the connections between sounds and letters as easily as those without (Wolf, 2008).

Not long after Castles et al. (2018) published their article, The New South Wales Teacher's Federation released a report compiled by Ewing (2018). This report reviewed the role of phonics in early years' classrooms situating its success in the development

of oral skills prior to school attendance. The paper argues that policy moves to universally implement synthetic phonics in Australian schools is premature and needs more research. The two papers were the foundation for the 2018 iteration of the phonics debate which was a prominent feature in networked education communities on Twitter.

The use of the internet to debate the best way to teach reading has reconfigured how the literacy field is constituted and reconstituted. For example, academic researchers disseminate their findings in places that are easily accessed by parents and policy makers: blogs, YouTube and Twitter are pertinent to this article. Castles et al.'s (2018) paper was released in direct competition to Ewing's (2018). Both used internet capabilities to disseminate their findings and both were engaged with by parents—the latter emphasising the role of parents in reading and the former in close online conversation with parents of children with dyslexia who wrote blogs about their challenges teaching their children to read. Parents, extending on previous findings by Woods and Baroutsis (2019), are powerful new interlocutors in the Reading Wars, resisting the responsabilisation of parents for the teaching of reading.

This article reports on research that used the affordances of digital sociology to investigate how the internet has shifted the nature of the field of literacy production.

## Qualitative critical network digital sociology

Qualitative critical network (QCN) digital approaches (Barnes, 2020) are committed to the *qualitative* techniques which look at the multiple layers of information in data texts, and in the case of this research, social media data texts. Linked to network ethnography, QCN analysis differs from traditional situated qualitative work in that it iteratively considers a widespread political sentiment which has been commented on by multiple people in disparate locations. It seeks to understand how subjective interlocutors link themselves to the networked field in order to participate in its production. Social media is a key data resource for this type of work, particularly the analysis of hashtags. Hashtags are hyperlinked key words on social media that, when taken up by many, can be mediated ad hoc publics, or spaces where interlocutors gather to discuss political and social issues online (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Hashtags allow interlocutors to determine how they want to become a part of the widespread phenomenon, and each inclusion of a hashtag shapes and reshapes representations of the field under production. This article considers the use of the Twitter hashtag #phonicsdebate to consider who the interlocutors are that insert themselves into the literacy field, how the negotiated laws and forms of capital are represented within the social network analysis, and which issues are particularly combative in the negotiation of the field.

## Data collection

The social media analyses were conducted using two different data collection approaches outlined below. The first involved Twitter, and the other, manual internet archive research. The Application Programming Interface (API) of Twitter provides the framework for these data to be downloaded in machine-readable format, and

this API access is provided explicitly so that third parties, including researchers and commercial service providers, are able to access such public content in a standardised fashion and at high volume.

### Twitter databank

The first Twitter dataset was provided by the Queensland University of Technology's Digital Observatory using #phonicsdebate, #phonicscheck, associated key words "teaching + reading", and "phonics". These were collected from the two-week period either side of 31st July 2018 where a live-streamed YouTube debate considered the value of universal synthetic phonics. The tweets were those from identified Australian Twitter accounts, but the dataset did include international participation if an Australian account retweeted a broadcast. Tweet extraction did not include tweets or profile information from Twitter accounts that were 'protected', that is, those whose tweets and profile details are accessible only to other users approved by the account holder.

The datapoints were read to ensure all tweets related to the phonics debate. Those that did not were deleted leaving 2150 data points (tweets) from 376 Twitter users. This Twitter data set was collected 14 months after the phonics debate in September 2019. This means that it is not a complete representation of the tweets at the time as those involved in the live tweets could have deleted their tweets, a common practice on Twitter. Therefore, this approach ethically considers people's rights to be forgotten (Rosen, 2012) online.

### Manual internet archival research

The third small data set was comprised of media objects using the following parameters: they needed to be about the Australian phonics debate, published between June 2018 and December 2019 or hyperlinked in the collected phonics debate tweets. I collected 96 media objects. By analysing their content, I coded them to Universal Synthetic Phonics (USP) or Whole language (WL). Using CrowdTangle (crowdtangle.com), a tool for collecting interaction metadata on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Reddit, I assessed Facebook interaction impressions on the content to get a sense of their impact.

### Ethical considerations

The analysis represented below was conducted by collecting small data.<sup>1</sup> This type of internet data is subject to some of the most rigorous ethical approval protocols developed in the last decade. I have previously written on the ethical use of small social media data (Barnes, et al., 2015) and their representation in networks (Barnes, 2020) arguing that until third party usage of small data is more visible and

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<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by the Human Ethics process at Queensland University of Technology (Code: 1900000567).



continuously in the public sphere, social media broadcasts should not be directly quoted in publications, even with informed consent, due to the possibility of breached anonymity via search engines. As such the research below will discuss findings in themes without direct quotation of individual social media broadcasts.

## The production of the literacy field through the #phonicsdebate

The digital sociology presented in the second half of this paper is organised along the following four analyses. Firstly, how the two rhetorical collectives—WL and USP—identified each other in the digital sphere. Secondly, how the USP collective used highly stylised attempts to redraw the lines of the literacy field through the use of social media texts and an understanding of algorithmic activism to transform the mode of discursive struggle that produces the literacy field. Thirdly, how the WL collective, through social media dissemination strategies, used rhetoric to justify the centrality of their authority to make judgements about what does and does not warrant inclusion in the literacy field. The fourth describes two moments of discursive struggle where rhetorical tropes common to the two fields could be places to reimagine the field of literacy education.

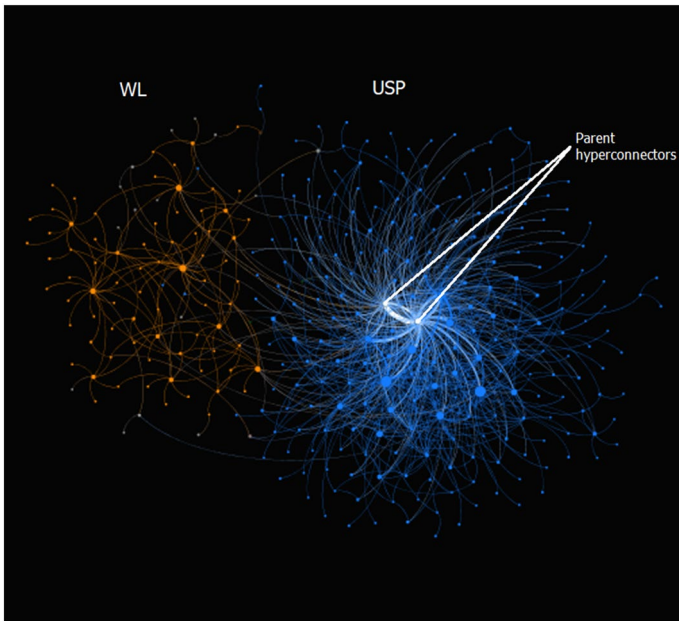
### Identifying the rhetorical collectives

The phonics debate was hosted by the Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies on 31st July 2018. The debate was also streamed live on YouTube and is still available for viewing (Australian College of Educators, 2018). Those in the physical and virtual audience were encouraged to live tweet the debate using the hashtag #phonicsdebate. The research presented below collected data from the night of the debate, one week beforehand to capture the marketing, and for one week afterwards to capture tweets of those “catching up” on YouTube.

The proposition presented for debate was that Phonics in Context was not Enough, but it was explained there was no intended winner except robust dialogue. In other words, the interlocutors would use the occasion to negotiate the shape of the field of literacy education, not replace one collective with another. The USP was composed of cognitive scientist, Professor Ann Castles; contributor to CIS and director of literacy project Five from Five, Dr Jennifer Buckingham; and a principal of a Sydney suburban school. The WL collective was represented by education academic, Professor Robyn Ewing; education academic, Dr Kathleen Rushton; and a second Sydney suburban principal.

Using the open source network analysis tool Gephi and Force Atlas 2 algorithm to explore the social network of the phonics debate on 31 July 2018, Fig. 1 shows two distinct groups using Twitter to live tweet. By analysing each tweet, the individual actors were coded USP (blue actors on the right) or advocates for WL (orange on the left). Those tweeters who did not actively take a side in the debate were coloured grey.





**Fig. 1** Social network of #phonicsdebate 31 July–9 August 2018

The Force Atlas 2 algorithm generated a visualisation that showed the two distinctive groups were connected but also largely contained. The debate format allowed the analysis to show the two opposing sides were aware the other existed as is evident through the few connections which link the two sides together. The connection between the two groups also suggests that the two fields are in a process of negotiating the reimagination of the field of literacy research, rather than two disconnected worlds unaware of the other.

In identifying the individuals who write themselves into each collective I manipulated the data to show key actors who were not automatically identified by the algorithm. In tweaking the raw Twitter data so the social networking software would recognise when each debater was referred to by the live tweeters a network was represented that showed all instances when Castles, Buckingham, Ewing, Rushton and the two principals were mentioned in the data (see Fig. 2).

The resulting visualisation almost erased the initial visualisation of two collectives, drawing them into a single network. The data manipulation also revealed key interlocutors in the USP collective to include parents (the central hyper-connector), practising psychologists, dyslexia lobby group accounts, a literacy policy account, and additional cognitive psychology academics. The visualisation suggests that on social media at this point in time, the USP field of reading research absorbed the traditional central figures of the field—WL advocates. This network representation signals the presence of highly stylised strategies to redraw the lines of field. This warranted further investigation.



**Fig. 2** Manipulated social network analysis of #phonicsdebate

### Attempts to redraw the lines of the field

The universal synthetic phonics (USP) collective's use of highly stylised strategies can be best understood through their use of social media. Firstly, the phonics debate was organised by the Centre for Independent Studies, a libertarian think tank skilled in the manipulation of media (Hart't & Vromen, 2008). Secondly, it was an organised event that advocated for the use of Twitter and deliberately created a binary that suits Twitter's functionality. For example, algorithmic activism (Maly, 2019) considers how political activists use social media algorithms to actively constitute politically influential networks (Barnes, 2020). In short, algorithms effectively reinforce digital intimacy (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) where online connections serve a social function which reinforces social connections and bonds. As such, social media can harness collectivity and collectivity has always been central to the renegotiation of fields.

Figures 3 and 4 show that the USP collective harnessed the collectivising power of social, legacy (traditional outlets now online), and professional (teacher journals) media to redefine the field of literacy. Their content creation was substantially more prolific, had greater variety of texts, and were engaged with on a significantly larger scale than the WL collective over the 18-month period.

Such use of social media to attempt to redraw the lines of the field of literacy research is a sociological transformation that all education researchers must be aware of. The public shift in authority from expertise and rigorous methodology to personalised experience and virality that social media has brought (Brooks, 2012), is a rhetorical revolution that cannot be dismissed or underestimated.

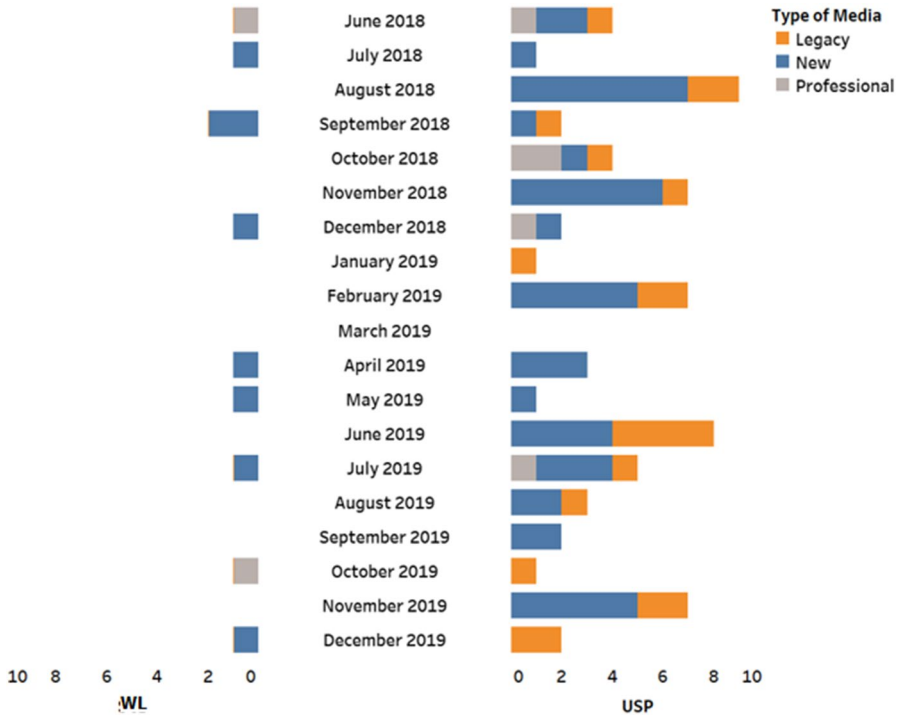
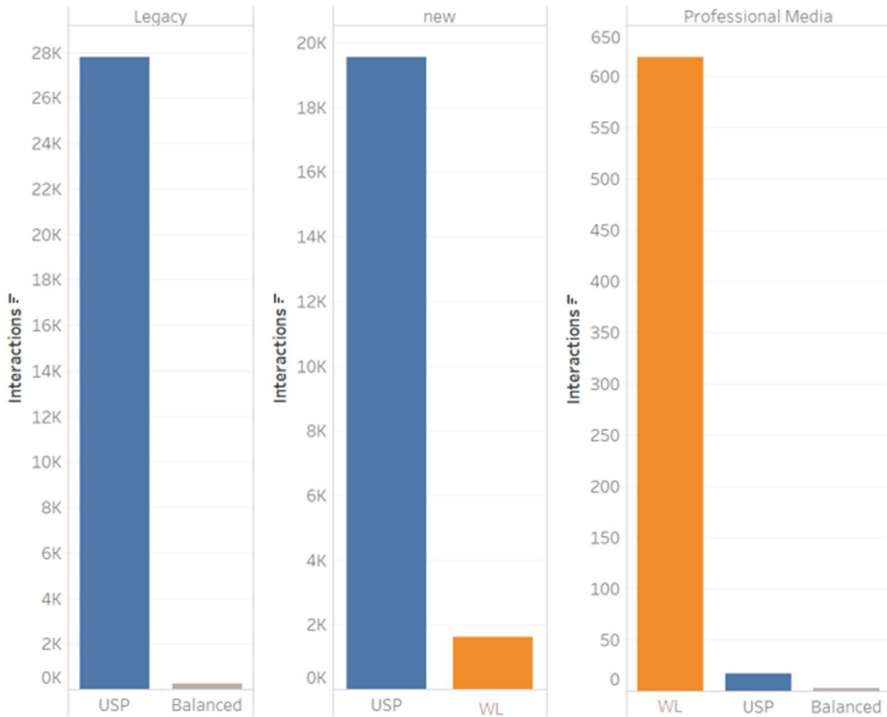


Fig. 3 Types of texts about the phonics debate

### Justification of authority to make judgements

Just because the whole language (WL) collective was effectively erased from social media does not mean that they no longer control the production of the field of literacy research. Rather, by controlling the teacher education pipeline, the WL collective continues to determine the laws and capital of the field. Australian literacy researchers’ concentration on the agency of literacy teachers to navigate the politics and economy of the field has become an increasingly prevalent field of research as the laws of the field are renegotiated and new forms of capital become increasingly important. For example, Ryan and Barton (2020) examine how literacy teachers and leaders negotiate the enablements and constraints of the rapidly changing priorities of the literacy agenda in education policy. Comber and Nixon (2011) also explain how a teacher of reading comprehension navigated the complexity of expectations and accountability in their field. This rhetoric of authority and social law negotiation within the field of literacy education is also evident in digital media objects that the WL collective produced in the 18 months of data collection.

The claim to authority within the field for the WL collective can be seen in statements like Ewing’s in her debate speech: “My colleagues and I have ...as far as we can work out at least 100 years cumulatively of working in education, working with



**Fig. 4** Interaction on Facebook with texts about the phonics debate

children, helping them learn to read, working with teachers, and working with pre-service teachers” (Five from Five, 2018). However, such rhetorical claim to authority is possible by both collectives and more a site of discursive struggle, as described below, rather than a useful object for examining the centrality of the WL collective in literacy education. Instead a blog (Literacy Educators, 2019) published on the Australian Association of Educational Research’s blogsite, *EduResearch Matters* is more informative.

The blog was written, and the signatures collected, in response to the Federal Minister for Education’s development of an “‘expert task force’ [emphasis in the original] to advise the Australian Government on the teaching of phonics and reading.” The blog uses rhetorical devices to situate the 180 signatories as central to the field of literacy education, in a position to make judgment, and uses specific tactics to demonstrate that authority.

The writers of the blog specifically call themselves a “collective” and by sourcing the 180 signatures, signal that the collective is both rhetorically united and deeply expert. The writers use rhetoric which positions the expert task force members as outside of the field of literacy education by explicitly questioning the validity of the members to inform the Australian Government on teaching reading. The writers use emotive defensive language—“profound concerns”, “erroneous assumption”, “narrowly focussed”, “not balanced”, “conflict of interest”—and

visual prompts—emphases each time ‘task force’ is written. By establishing their credentials to pass judgement on the task force and the Australian Government’s actions, they then outline the processes that they as a collective have agreed are a better way forward. This blog performs a very specific field of expertise that was originally signalled by Ewing—the experience of practitioners. It also demonstrates laws of the field which have become established within the field and an expectation that those attempting to reshape the field comply to those laws.

These types of expectations about how things are done permeate traditional academic practices and have long been the expected way of policy change (Lingard, 2016). However, as illustrated above, the USP collective have used new ways of competing for policy advisory powers by using highly stylised strategies that understand how the internet distributes information by blanketing the information space about the teaching of reading with multiple texts, rather than organising one text, published through an authoritative avenue, with multiple signatures.

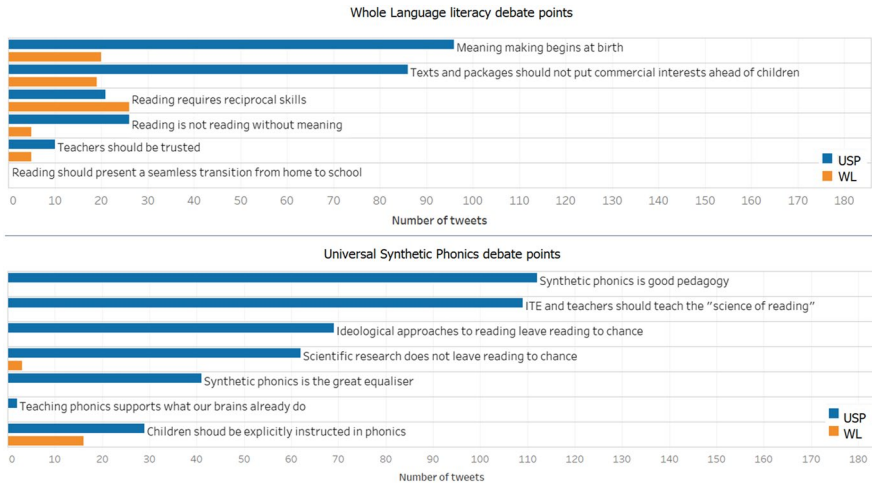
### **Moments of discursive struggle**

A discursive struggle occurs when two fields struggle for hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014) in a field and usually occurs “at the level of key signifiers, whose meanings are tacitly contested” (Rear & Jones, 2013, p. 375). In a Bordieusian (1993) sense, this involves “identifying the different articulations/codes/styles of discourse individuals deploy as they shift across different fields” (Myles, 1999, p. 881). In essence, two fields might worry each other at multiple points, but there are often specific intersections where the contest becomes quite heated as these are positions that neither collective are willing to concede. Two of these sites in the struggle over the literacy education field were noted when the arguments presented during the phonics debate were mapped against the tweets that engaged with them. Figure 5 shows the number of tweets for key points.

Two points were largely agreed upon by both perspectives: that reading requires reciprocal skills and that children should be explicitly be instructed in phonics. The discursive struggle was located in the Twitter data where the USP tweeters actively rebutted the WL points: meaning making begins at birth, and phonics packages should not put commercial interests ahead of children. Drawing on both the tweets and the phonics debate transcript (Five from Five, 2018), the following will explain and suggest reasons why these two points attracted the most refutation activity on Twitter.

### **Meaning begins at birth**

A key point made by the WL literacy field was that the early years of reading instruction should be embedded in context because children arrive at school with different socio-cultural backgrounds. They argued that different understandings of the world mean teachers have a responsibility to develop some shared meaning before embarking on decoding (Thomson, 2002). Furthermore, that decoding should



**Fig. 5** Sites of discursive struggle amongst tweeters watching the phonics debate 31 July 2018

occur in context of the English language, and not separately (or synthetically). This largely academic statement about the nature of reading, however, failed to comprehend what such statements might mean for the general observer of the debate at home.

Tweeters from the USP perspective saw this as a positioning of children's failure to read within the family. Parents encouraged others to post photos of their bookcases, shared blogs of them reading to their children, and generally disputed the idea that reading is the responsibility of families. Many of these tweets showed that families do read to their children prior to school, but their children still fail to learn to read. The general sentiment of the almost 100 retweeted postings was that reading is the duty of the teacher, and general public academic statements, like "meaning begins at birth", responsabilises parents rather than keeping the focus on those trained to teach reading.

What emerged was a discursive struggle between socio-cultural and inclusive education. The WL debaters' point of view is underscored by an understanding of socio-cultural differences across Australia. They have developed research that addresses education's need to acknowledge differences based on race, class, ethnicity, culture and gender and adjust practice to acknowledge the lived experiences of children as they interpret what they read. The USP debaters, on the other hand, are concerned with the development of inclusive practices which acknowledge the diversity of needs associated with decoding the English language, which concentrates on cognitive reading difficulties. Both fields have a social justice agenda that aims to reconfigure literacy practices to cater to diversity; however, as one field concentrates on cognitive and the other on socio-cultural definitions of social justice, discursive struggle manifests as an apples and oranges debate between two different reciprocal skills of reading, rather than reading as a whole.

## Commercialisation of phonics packages

The other key point of discursive struggle was the statement by one WL debater that one member of the USP collective had vested interest in advocating for USP as they had developed a commercial package for teaching synthetic phonics. The commercialisation of education is a key contemporary education academic focus, particularly in relation to literacy policy (see for example Hogan, 2016). Like “meaning begins at birth”, this largely academic understanding of the distribution and ownership of education materials is heavily disputed by the USP field.

The USP Twitter field rebutted the commercialisation argument through three points. Firstly, that phonics and reader packages have a long history in the teaching of reading, not simply now that USP seeks to reconstitute the field. *Reading Recovery* (<https://readingrecovery.org/reading-recovery/>), a package mentioned by one of the WL speakers (Five from Five, 2018), was used as an example of this point. Secondly, USP argued that teachers should be able to teach synthetic phonics without a package and reoriented the argument to failings in Teacher Education. Thirdly, the argument was dismissed as inflammatory, bad-mannered, and aside from the point as to whether synthetic phonics should be taught in schools.

What has emerged is a discursive struggle between academic fears about the rampant commercialisation of education and the need for synthetic phonics instruction to be supported. Teacher education has become the setting of this discursive struggle. English curriculum courses need to prepare future teachers for a school that could use WL approaches, a USP approach, a variation of either, or a combination of the two. As such, in 2020, the Australian Commonwealth government audited initial teacher education courses to see where the teaching of reading could be taught separately to English curriculum. However, the teacher education setting does not account for qualified teachers to be educated in new approaches to the teaching of reading, therefore commercial products are an inevitable part of a profession that emphasises evidence informed instruction, whether USP or WL.

## What does this mean for teachers of reading and writing?

In reporting on this research, it is important to return to the main sociological questions that it has worked to answer:

- What does it mean for an academic literacy researcher to claim a role at the centre of research into how to teach reading and writing and to take on the role of judge about who gains admission to that field?
- What does it mean for non-education researchers and literacy advocates to negotiate, navigate and reimagine a literacy research field that includes them?

In terms of the first question, this research highlights how social media is now a key player in cross-field effects on literacy policy. As the internet is a public space, literacy researchers cannot rely on readers of their research to understand



the axiomatic underpinning of their field of research. The misinterpretation of the “meaning begins at birth” is a case in point. It appears from the digital texts that the WL literacy debaters assumed their audience understood they did not seek to problematise families. Rather WL debaters concentrated on critiquing literacy assessment policy that fails to acknowledge the complex social power relationships at work in the classroom (Green et al., 1997; Hayes et al., 2017).

As new media are increasingly being used for dissemination of research it is important to raise the question of who is responsible for the education of the public about literacy teaching and limiting the spread of misinformation. I would suggest that if the WL claim the centre of the field, and take on the role of judging who becomes a member of that field, they have the responsibility for public education.

In terms of the second question, health academics, cognitive psychologists, speech therapists and parents wishing to redefine the field of literacy research, must be aware that the field has long been a site of discursive struggle. Thoroughly understanding the role literacy politics and policy has played in the continuous redefinition of education (in Australia) over the last four decades is essential knowledge for those striving to be included as experts in the field of literacy education.

The reimagination of literacy education is going to be best achieved through a mutual understanding of what drives each field to either protect itself or advocate for change. That involves robust discussions about what motivates research, what the research is, who is responsible for ensuring research informed literacy practices are implemented, and how to ensure that agenda is achieved through the limits of initial teacher education and the expense of qualified teacher professional development. As an outsider researching this discursive struggle, my personal observations are that both sides want what is best for children. This requires the lead experts in the field of literacy and reading research to take responsibility, not just for what is researched and how it is taught, but also how the public consumes that research.

## **Towards a digital sociology of education**

This paper’s main contribution is to the growing field of digital sociology, particularly the digital sociology of education. By combining the established theories of sociology of education, like Rawolle and Lingard’s (2008) extension of Bourdieu to cross-field effects, with methodological tools in digital and new media research, like qualitative critical network analysis, this research has shown the possibilities for digital sociology in education research. This paper has shown it is possible to trace the digital footprint of a discursive struggle using digital methods. The use of social media small data as a tool for inquiry is an emerging research approach that is well suited to education, with its rigorous ethical protocols and smaller, qualitative data sets. While the abductive nature of the research reported here, drawing heavily on the theoretical framework, indicates the observations are limited to the digital, the line between online and offline are increasingly blurred. Events of 2020 and the banning of President Donald Trump from social media platforms show the tech giants are aware of the effects of social media on the offline social. As such it is more

important for the digital sociology of education to become a core feature of educational research in the future.

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