

Blogging From Inside the Ivory Tower

I've found this article almost impossible to write. You see, I used to love blogging. I've blogged for over five years. I've written papers about blogs. I've taught classes with blogs. I've blogged about completing a PhD, teaching my first classes, getting a real job and becoming the head of my small department. I must have given a few dozen talks on blogs, to students and professors and librarians and artists and school children and engineers and teachers. You'd think it would be easy to write a book chapter about research blogs. And yet I've found this article almost impossible to write.

I find it harder to blog, too, to be honest. When Torill Mortensen and I wrote what appears to have been the first research paper on blogs (Mortensen and Walker), I was an outsider trying to enter the ivory tower. We were grad students in a new only half-accepted field in a country on the outskirts of the world: of course we loved blogging. Blogging allowed us to circumvent the power structures of academia and geography. We found our voices. We heard ourselves, we heard each other and we were heard by others. It was exhilarating.

Today I blog and my students read the post. I post a photo to Flickr and the next time I log in I notice that ten new people have made me their contact since last week, at least half of them students, I think, but I'm not sure. I meet a professor in another department for the first time and he says, lifting an eyebrow, "I've read your blog," and I know too little about him to be able to interpret that eyebrow. I preferred blogging when most people didn't know about it.

When I started writing this chapter, I thought I could construct a serious article discussing different kinds of research blog and exploring the virtues of the genre. I read research discussing how scholars use communication technology. I wanted to see research blogs as a step in the long history of academic discourse. And yet every time I began to write, I felt that anxiety I thought frequent blogging had dispelled long ago: the anxiety that if I said what I really

wanted to say I wouldn't know how to defend it. My blog mirrored my disease, and my posts became briefer, less open and less frequent.

I've tried to write this article as a serious, academic discussion and it hasn't worked. This essay insists on being about something more personal: why is blogging no longer easy? Why was blogging so immensely liberating when I was a PhD student, and yet so complicated now? What happens when research blogs – and their authors – become part of the academic system rather than being outsiders trying to get in?

The importance of hierarchy

Back when I still thought I could write this essay in a conventional scholarly manner, keeping my ambivalence and anxiety about blogging neatly outside of the text, I read research on scholarly mailing lists, which rose in importance during the eighties and nineties. Despite the enduring success of some mailing lists, most have devolved into distribution channels for conference announcements or for irregular and off-topic random postings. Blogs are still on the ascendant and may never go through such a decline, but veterans of mailing lists still invariably compare blogs to this slightly older genre.

An interesting, if unpleasant, reason for the decline of useful, constructive discussions on mailing lists has been suggested by Timothy Stephen and Teresa M. Harrison in their 1994 study of Comserve, an electronic community. Stephen and Harrison found that the relative anonymity and openness of mailing lists dissolves the hierarchical systems that are necessary for the academic system to work:

In a well-known case study, Zuboff (1988) documented the tension created within a corporation when a computer-based electronic communication system was installed. The openness, inclusiveness, and anonymity of computer-mediated communication was antithetical to the organization's hierarchical structure; it facilitated the rise of democratic dialogue among workers, thereby placing stress upon traditional hierarchical roles. . (Stephen and Harrison 768-69)

This democratic dialogue is exactly what Torill Mortensen and I praised in our "Blogging Thoughts" paper. We described an example where a professor's article about bloggers was met by vociferous and critical responses from the bloggers themselves. The bloggers' reaction was strong enough to require a response from the professor – however, he didn't have a blog of his own, so could not respond in the same space as the bloggers were discussing his work. Instead, he posted a response in one of his students' blog, in an unusual inversion of the usually hierarchical access to the media (Mortensen and Walker 263).

I still love these inversions of conventional power relationships that blogs and other forms of online publication make possible. And yet Zuboff, as cited by Stephen and Harrison, notes in particular the *tension* that this inversion creates. Is the unease I feel in writing this article and in blogging at all these days related to that tension? I would rather not think so, but objectively it's clear that while my conventional academic status is not nearly as high as that of the professor Torill Mortensen and I wrote about, I'm now very clearly positioned within the conventional academic hierarchical system. Perhaps blogging disrupts hierarchies that now serve me well, and that makes me ambivalent about them?

Stephen and Harrison continue:

As Holzner (1968) has described, many work communities define themselves by regulating the contexts in which work occurs and by imposing strict controls on the flow of communication. Academic work communities are no different; indeed, many of Holzner's examples are drawn directly from the sciences.

Thus, while it is easy to be enamored of the networks' potential for enhancing democratic exchange, it is worth considering that the culture of the academy is essentially an hierarchical meritocracy. Voices become privileged through individual accomplishment; in fact, the degree to which communication is restricted is often one of the few public signs of a scholar's disciplinary stature. Those at the top of a disciplinary hierarchy are more difficult to access and often restrict their public communication to prestige channels. Thus, it is doubtful that achievement-oriented academics will be natively inclined to carry their dialogue to a venue in which the relative anonymity of authors and audiences reduces the ability to gauge the impact of one's contribution. One might anticipate that there would be a tendency for academics to restrict their communication on the public network channels to information of lesser consequence. (Stephen and Harrison 768-69)

In many ways, blogs support the academic hierarchy better than mailing lists. While a scholar posting to a mailing list can add a signature below the text of his or her email to establish credentials, those who are not already aware of the participants in the field and their place in the hierarchy of experts are unlikely to fully grasp this. In contrast to mailing lists, traditional academic conferences have far higher entry thresholds as well clear methods for signalling who has the most clout. For one thing, the most important people within the community will be on stage, giving the keynote or other high profile lectures, and they'll spend most of their time off the podium speaking to each other rather than with the plebs or grad students.

Most scholarly mailing lists are open to anyone who is interested, although subscribers do generally have to sign up to read the messages. Blogs are even more easily accessible. Readers do not have to sign up and can often participate in the discussion without any special membership.

On the other hand, an individual blog functions in much the same way as the lecture podium. One person, or a group of people, is up on the podium

and is thus very clearly defined as the main speaker, the person you should be listening to. Questions and comments from the audience are often encouraged, but they are clearly positioned as subordinate to the main speaker's words.

So is my ambivalence about blogging – and about writing this essay about research blogging – caused by my having bought into the academic system? On the contrary, I think my blog, and the blogs of other academics, are clearly positioned in the academic hierarchy. My blog, as many other academic blogs, gives my name as Dr Jill Walker, it states the department I work at and my university, the “about” section gives my title, my research interests and the courses I’m teaching. I suppose I might unconsciously be trying to restrict communication to emphasise a higher status, as Stephen and Harrison suggest, but that would seem counterproductive given the positive responses blogging has generally brought me in academia, such as invitations to write papers, give talks and teach classes.

It’s more complicated than that.

What is a research blog?

There are several different kinds of research blogs, some of them closer to the traditional forms of academic publication than others. These work in different ways. Let me describe a few of the kinds.

Public Intellectuals

Many academic bloggers use their blogs as a platform for political debate based on theories of political science, feminism, discourse and media analysis and so on. *Bitch PhD* is an example of a political blog (though it is not exclusively political) which discusses current events and personal experience in a theoretical and generally feminist manner. *Crooked Timber* is another example, being a group weblog of a number of political scientists.

Research logs

The “pure” research log is a record of research conducted and ideas that might be pursued. There are several different traditions for this. Humanists have traditionally kept notebooks to collect quotations and ideas, laboratory scientists have kept records of their experiments, and engineers and architects draw sketches of designs. The dissertation log might be seen as a special case of research log, especially when written specifically for a supervisor and not for a general audience.

Pseudonymous blogs about academic life

The kind of title given to this proliferating branch of the academic blog is characterised by a tongue in cheek refusal to revere the ivory tower experience: *Dr. Crazy*, *Confessions of a Community College Dean* and *Barely Tenured* are but a small sampling of titles chosen. Being pseudonymous, these researchers generally don't reveal their exact field of specialisation, but instead tend to discuss more general aspects of academic life and the paraphernalia of research. While not exactly research blogs, these blogs certainly allow the discussion of issues more likely to be discussed in the coffee breaks than the presentation sessions of a conference: how to find the time to do research, how to behave at a conference, the process of earning a PhD or tenure and so on.

These different genres of academic blogs form such separate clusters that authors in one genre show little awareness of the existence of the other genres, rarely cross-linking and sometimes even complaining at the lack of other genres.

When I began blogging I intended to write a pure research log. What I ended up writing was a hybrid genre, my favourite kind of research blog: the blog that both discusses the content of research, the ideas themselves, and that also discusses the process and experience of researching. I think to explain that better, I need to tell you the story of my experience as a blogger.

Becoming a blogger

I began blogging on the day I discovered Blogger.com: October 9, 2000. I was reading *Caterina.net*, and I can't remember how I was there or whether I was conscious that this was a "blog", but I do remember the moment I saw the blue and orange button in one of the sidebars: "Powered by Blogger". I think I clicked it more out of vague curiosity than with any clear idea that this was something that would change my life. Yes, I know, that sounds rather extreme, doesn't it? Change my life. But in many ways it did, you see.

Blogger.com didn't have the same design then as it does now. Writing this, I took a look at archive.org to see what, precisely, I saw on that October morning. The blue and orange was the same as now, but most of the page was actually devoted to the company blog. The most recent posts, when I saw the page for the first time, celebrated the creation of the ten thousandth blog on Blogspot, Blogger's still-existent free hosting service, and noted the publication of a *New Yorker* interview with Meg Hourihan, one of the founders of Pyra, the company that developed Blogger. There were also links to the most recently updated blogs and, most importantly, there was the slogan, the thing that ensured I was a blogger ten minutes later: "Push-button publishing for the peo-

ple”. In big letters just below, it said: “Create your own blog! Blogger offers you instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes.”

I was still three years away from successfully defending my PhD, a young would-be scholar in a nascent field sitting in a coastal town in Norway a long way from most of the world. Of course I clicked the Start Now! button. Wouldn't you?

As soon as I'd started my own blog I began looking for other blogs. I only found one other Norwegian blog (written in English) and no other research blogs. Of course, back then, I don't suppose I really knew what a research blog was, or could be. But soon enough I found myself writing about my work (easy to do since my research was on new media narrative and art) and asking researchers I'd met at conferences to start blogs of their own. Many did.

Blogs, you see, are inherently social. Whether you have five readers or five hundred doesn't really matter, it's the knowledge that this will be read that is important. For a very new scholar, used to a world where three people will read a paper, grade it, and then put it away forever, that is an exhilarating and frightening idea.

Over the next years, my blogging was an important tool in my research. I deliberately used my blog to develop my writing voice, just as one might keep a journal as a tool to improve one's writing and thinking. The most important way my blogging helped my research was social, though. Through my blog I developed and connected to a network of other people, mostly PhD students but also people in industry and more experienced academics, who were interested in the same topics as I. There weren't many other research bloggers back then. In 2002 I compiled a list of all the research blogs I could find, and reached about 20, though I found a few new ones every week. By 2003 I couldn't keep up with the emails from new research bloggers asking to be included, and I gave up trying to keep the list up to date. Today *Crooked Timber's* list of academic blogs includes several hundred blogs, and that list is far from comprehensive. Lilia Efimova and Stephanie Hendricks have shown how weblog clusters change over time, often spurred by events like conferences where bloggers meet colleagues, merging online and offline worlds (Efimova and Hendrick).

About the same time, having blogged for a year or two, my colleague Torill Mortensen and I wrote our paper on research blogs, “Blogging Thoughts” (Mortensen and Walker). We wrote with enthusiasm about the promise of blogging, and the ways in which blogging had been a valuable tool in our research. Torill and I both still blog, years later, and though we probably would have written that article a little differently today, we still pretty much agree with what we wrote. And yet things have changed.

Today I'm a tenured scholar, I chair a small department, I advise grad students and plan curricula and apply for funding and all the other myriad tasks a professional scholar performs. It's impossible to say objectively whether my blogging helped me reach that goal. I know that my blogging helped me gain a foothold among researchers in my field, that the regular writing and discussions with readers and other bloggers helped me become a confident writer, and that I had more opportunities to give talks and write in other genres than most of my non-blogging peers. So quite probably, blogging helped me succeed in earning a PhD and getting my first academic job.

Does blogging still help me? I'm not so sure. Now my students read my blog, my colleagues read my blog, and quite possibly (though I tend to assume not) the department secretary and the dean read my blog. No doubt my daughter will read some of it when she's older. Five years ago, I could safely assume none of my colleagues would read my blog unless they were especially internet savvy and actually interested in the topics I write about.

Blogging does not allow for the changes in roles we're used to in different relationships. I behave differently when I'm camping with my family or having Sunday brunch with friends than when I'm in a meeting with the dean or discussing the budget with my colleagues. I tell my girlfriends different and more complete versions of my life than I tell my students. Most perplexing are the strangers, people I've never met, or whom I might have taught in a single class. Although 99% of my life is unblogged, these people think that they know me. I used to laugh when they asked me how I could stand people knowing all about me. I stopped laughing last year. I was talking intimately with a girlfriend in a foreign city at a bus stop, assuming we had the privacy of a public place far from home. A few weeks later I noticed a link to my blog from a blog written by a woman in the city I'd visited. She wrote that she'd heard two women talking by a bus stop and had realised that it was jill/txt and a friend and that she knew just what they were talking about. That is a side effect of blogging that had never occurred to me, and that makes me want fewer readers, not more.

A discomfort with putting forward one face to strangers, friends and colleagues has little to do with research blogging specifically. These issues are general problems in blogging, and different bloggers solve them in different ways. The other discomfort I've recently felt with blogging is more directly due to being perfectly accepted within the traditional academic system.

Fellow bloggers told me that one of the reasons they'd enjoyed reading my blog as I was finishing my PhD is that I included a lot of posts about the *process* of research and specifically of completing such a large and daunting task. Comments in my blog and in emails told me that it had been useful to them to read daily about someone going through the same thing, just a few months or years ahead of them.

It's different though, being on the inside of the system. Most of the process of academic life on the inside of the system is in fact intensely interesting to academics. We lap up blogs that go through the details of the actual life of research and teaching: *Cheeky Prof*, *Barely Tenured*, *Just Tenured*, *New Kid on the Hallway*, *Bitch PhD*, *Wanna Be PhD*, *Learning Curves*; all these and more blog their to do lists (grade papers, write report, prep teaching, finish manuscript, feedback to X, prep meeting), their frustrations and joys with students or colleagues or conferences and the many ways in which their personal lives intersect with the academic profession. *Confessions of a Community College Dean* even succeeds in writing about university administration in an entertaining and engaging manner. These blogs are precisely about the process of research and academic life rather than about results or precise topics.

Notice though, that each and every one of those blog titles cloaks identity. They're all pseudonymous. Either academic blogs are written using a real name, in which case they'll probably be focused on traditional "content" and research, although there is also a strong genre of political academic blogs, generally written by (unsurprisingly) political scientists. Just as important are the pseudonymous ones, where you get all the honest process work and the bits that are too bodily (sex! mess! clothes! hunger!) or emotional (performance anxiety, depression, love, doubt) to fit into a traditional academic image.

It is striking that the popular genre of pseudonymous academic blogging completely reject academic hierarchies by refusing to identify themselves. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that pseudonymous bloggers embrace nothing but position in the hierarchy: almost all state the position of the blogger as adjunct, grad student, dean, tenure-track professor, recently tenured assistant professor etc. Perhaps this allows them to explore the tension created by the openness and democratic lack of hierarchy of these networks, noted by Stephen and Harrison citations above, rather than to be controlled by it.

Research practice

There is, then, a split between pseudonymous blogs and blogs where the author writes under her or his real name. Pseudonymous blogs tend to write about the process of research and teaching but leave out the content and documentation of research, that which has traditionally been the province of academic publications. Real name blogs tend to stick either to political issues not closely connected to the blogger's research, or else they document research by linking to the author's publications but include little discussion of the process of blogging. Graduate students' blogs are often the most successful at combining the process and the "content" of research.

Blogging is writing *practice*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick recently wrote. She was comparing regular blogging to the daily practice musicians are accustomed to, pointing out that the more she blogged, the more she was able to blog:

When I discipline myself to post something every day, or as close to it as I can, I find myself watching the world around me slightly differently, and treating my thoughts slightly differently, as though any occurrence or any idea might be capable of blossoming and bearing fruit. When I'm not posting, nothing seems worth writing about, just a bunch of dried-up seeds that'll eventually blow away or be eaten by the birds. (*Planned Obscurecence*, September 11, 2005.)

Research blogging can likewise be research practice. As Lilia Efimova has pointed out, research bloggers rarely explicitly document their research in their blogs (*Mathemagenic*, April 16, 2003). Although I agreed with her on this at first (*jill/txt*, June 5, 2003), after a little thought I changed my mind:

Yesterday I agreed with Lilia that most researchers' blogs don't document research. Today while reading a post on David Weinberger's blog I realised that that's completely beside the point: research happens in blogs, and in the conversations between blogs. Blogs aren't about documentation, they're about doing, thinking and discussing. And they're about catching fleeting thoughts and making them explicit: if I hadn't blogged my response to Lilia yesterday I probably wouldn't have thought about David's post today as research and wanted to rethink yesterday's ideas as I'm doing now. (*jill/txt*, June 6, 2003)

Traditionally, the process of research has been transient: conference discussions, conversations with colleagues over coffee and reviewers' reports on unpublished manuscripts. Only the final publications remained, usually with traces of uncertainty, false starts, considerations and process neatly edited out. As a PhD student the academic system has built-in mechanisms to help with the process of research and to make it visible. There are specific graduate seminars, you meet regularly with an advisor and you're expected to accept correctives from senior academics. You're an advanced learner, but still very clearly a learner. As an academic in a permanent or tenured job at a university, your position changes. Now there are few role models for making the process, the *practice* of research visible. Small wonder then, that while graduate students often blog openly and exploratively about their own research, most professors seem to blog either pseudonymously, rarely or relatively impersonally, in almost all cases sticking to blog topics that have little to do with their own research practice.

I do still believe in blogging. I think that we have yet to find the real place of blogging. Whether or not blogging still exists in its current form in ten years time, the public sharing of research practice is likely to become more and more visible. We'll have to deal with it somehow. Hopefully we'll avoid raised eyebrows and people in foreign cities knowing too many of our intimate secrets.

Will we write academic papers in 2035?

Scholars work in the genres of their time. Socrates did his academic work and dissemination in dialogues with his students. Print publication is only a necessity of scholarship in today's book-bound world. Today many universities measure our publication rates in carefully measured systems directly tied to our funding. Is this really going to be the way of the future?

One way of looking at weblogs and emerging forms of scholarly discussion and work is that they are the popularisation of research, or a new form of dissemination. If they allow ideas to be worked through it is in the same way as informal conversations in the breaks of a scholarly conference do, or perhaps at best they can replace or augment the debates that ideally (though usually not really) take place in the question sessions after traditional scholarly papers are presented.

What if the future of scholarship is not in papers and books, but in new forms of dialogue-based exploration of ideals? Could professors in 2035 use some descendant of weblogs as their site of developing ideas *and* as the main form of dissemination?

Weblogs in their current form can't fully replace traditional publication. They're superficial, quotidian, they're not rigorous enough, one might argue, they are too completely in the moment and encourage fast writing and thought rather than deep consideration and reflection. And yet it is obvious that bloggers tend to revisit the same issues again and again. Many bloggers are adept at linking back to related entries written months or even years earlier, both by themselves and by others. The link itself has become something of an ethics of blogging: link to your sources. If you're not sure of a fact or of the source of your ideas, search the web until you find out more about that and link to it. These foundations are, perhaps, the seeds of a genre that may grow to be as strong as the traditional academic essay.

The other great advantage of traditional publication over blogging, for the moment, is duration and accessibility. True, it is often easier to google something that is blogged rather than to find an academic paper, possibly not even online, that discusses the same issue. But the traditional academic paper is guaranteed longevity by a well designed library system. A blog discussion trail just a year or two old is hard to follow through its broken links and shut down servers. Being able to put things in bookshelves can help – or at least it can help those who have access to the bookshelf.

What would an academic community after print look like? Ted Nelson, the man who coined the word “hypertext” in the sixties, once said he'd “never imagined the techies would try to simulate *paper*” (Nelson), and yet that is exactly what most online journals do: they publish traditionally written and for-

matted papers as PDFs. Some journals, such as Kairos (english.ttu.edu/kairos), are experimenting with essay formats that integrate links, images, video and exploratory techniques that really use the medium. And yet even these essays remain clearly defined, whole objects.

Weblogs have no whole; they are not objects. They are processes, actions, sites of exchange, more like Socrates' original dialogues must have been than Plato's written version of them.

Will weblogs develop into something that is both scholarship in action and a complete form of dissemination and storage of ideas for the future? Or will we always need a Plato to write down these momentary dialogues in a way that can be stored for posterity?

We'll have to wait and see. In the meantime, let's keep exploring new genres, pushing the limits, and thinking about the kinds of tools we would need to make the future for scholarship that we truly want.

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