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Rohan Maitzen ^a

^a Dalhousie University

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DIGITAL FORUM

Scholarship 2.0: Blogging and/as Academic Practice

Rohan Maitzen

When I started my blog *Novel Readings* in 2007, I did not expect it to affect my academic practices at all, much less become one of those practices itself.¹ In retrospect, it seems inevitable that blogging, which fosters a spirit of open inquiry, exchange and conversation, would after a while make the conventional forms of academic research and writing feel constricting. Less predictable is that this discomfort with specific academic habits would prove so productive or so profoundly alter my general outlook on academia. Academic research has become defined by depth and specialization; I have (re)discovered the value and pleasure of breadth and exploration. Academic publishing proceeds glacially; I have learned the stimulation of immediacy. Academic publishing is also insular; blogging reoriented me towards the fundamental purpose of scholarly writing: communication – or what we now more elaborately call ‘knowledge dissemination’.

Perhaps I sound like an evangelist for blogging as the ‘scholarship of the future’. I am not. I do not think every academic should blog, and I certainly do not think blogging should replace all the other ways in which we carry on our work as intellectuals and educators. Blogging will neither suit nor serve every academic nor every academic purpose. I am convinced, though, that academic blogging can and should have an acknowledged place in the overall ecology of scholarship. It does contribute – and should be recognized as contributing – to both the intellectual and the institutional goals of our universities.

How did I arrive at these conclusions? Not by an orderly process, but through fits and starts of experimentation and opportunity, by some serendipitous connections between questions raised in my ongoing scholarly work and by answers arising, not so much from the content of my blog, as from the nature of blogging itself. Though I do not hold myself or my blog out as either typical or exemplary, an account of this process will at least be suggestive of the possibilities blogging creates and of the suitability of its form and ethos to a range of academic purposes.

I began posting short book reviews to *Novel Readings* at a time when I was already thinking a lot about changes in the practice of literary criticism. I was completing an anthology of Victorian writing about the novel, a project which highlighted the

1. Rohan Maitzen, *Novel Readings: Notes on Literature and Criticism* (2007–2010) <<http://maitzenreads.blogspot.co.uk/>> and (2010–) <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/>>.

relative novelty of literary criticism as a professional academic practice, as something written by and for specialists with no expectation of engaging a broader public. Reflecting on this historical development and on the split we now take for granted between book reviewing and academic criticism, I found a context for my lurking dissatisfaction with the parameters of my own critical work up to that point, which seemed marginal at best to the broader public conversation about literature. With the various institutional ‘givens’ of the modern university, I could not see how to do otherwise.

It did not occur to me for some time that *Novel Readings* might be part of the answer. However, as I was blogging about my reading and because that reading began to reflect my investigation into the history and purpose of criticism, my blogging and my academic research began to converge. I could, of course, have written about these topics off-line. In fact, for some time I did maintain a parallel set of research notes on criticism and the public sphere, as I had done for all my research projects in the past, but writing on-line had a different dynamic, one that itself began to influence my thinking about the processes and aims of criticism. For instance, connection and reciprocation are fundamental to the ethos of blogging: posts respond and link to each other, and comment threads continue the conversation. I began linking to, commenting on and replying to posts at other blogs, and my own blog began to attract comments which stimulated me to refine or expand or reconsider my ideas. Public criticism began to seem less like an abstraction to be analysed from a scholarly or historical perspective and more like a live possibility: an interactive practice in the common ground created by the internet. There it was: an answer to what else I could do.

So not only did I continue to blog but I deliberately shaped *Novel Readings* into a place where all the parts of my intellectual life – reading, writing, teaching, research – coexisted. I also became part of an ongoing conversation about the direction of scholarly writing and communication, one in which blogging was seen as a potentially transformative medium. In 2008, I was invited to become a regular contributor to a group blog, *The Valve*, which had launched in 2005 with the provocative declaration that, given the range of difficulties facing academic publishing,

the only way to get the blood of ideas moving is to rub its sorry limbs vigorously with ... conversations. Intelligent, bloggy bookchat by scholars, to label this crucial ingredient as the essentially unpretentious thing it is. That isn't scholarship; but – in a world with too much scholarship – it may be an indispensable complement to scholarship.²

Posting at *The Valve* gave me concrete experience of the value of academic practice carried out through social media. Participants discussed work in progress, participated in group readings, posted book reviews and talked passionately about

2. John Holbo, ‘Form Follows the Function of the Little Magazine’, *The Valve*, 31 March 2005 <http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/form_follows_the_function_of_the_little_magazin1/> [accessed 19 February 2012].

core issues such as the future of academic publishing or the never-ending ‘crisis’ in the humanities.

I posted to *The Valve* regularly for over two years. In that time I got valuable direct input on research and writing projects of my own, particularly the work I began doing on the Anglo-Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif – work which itself developed out of blog posts in which I puzzled over the overt allusions to George Eliot in Soueif’s fiction. As I explored the questions that this intertextual connection raised about literature and national identity, and about the role of fiction in achieving cultural and ethical understanding, I benefited from comments from other readers and scholars, many better versed than I was in the relevant theoretical contexts.

One tangible result of this work was a conference paper I presented in 2009 on Soueif’s novel *In the Eye of the Sun* and *Middlemarch*. A plan to develop the conference paper into an essay suitable for submission to a conventional academic journal was high on my priority list at the start of my 2011 sabbatical term, when like so many around the world I found myself watching events in Tahrir Square – and there, literally in the midst of them, sat Soueif, reporting for the *Guardian*. The laborious, metacritical contextualizing and theorizing, and especially the glacial pace, of academic publishing suddenly seemed intolerable obstacles to sharing insights that had immediate relevance. I stopped working on the academic paper and instead wrote an essay about Soueif for the online journal *Open Letters Monthly* where (as a direct result of my blogging) I had been invited to become first a contributor and then an editor.³ Though the conference paper remains the only formal academic result of my work on Soueif, that work overall has had enough impact that I was contacted last year to serve as the external examiner for an honours thesis on Soueif’s fiction. I remain interested in writing about Soueif, but it is difficult for me to see why, at this point, I would want or need to do that writing inside the box of conventional academic publishing. The only incentive is professional: unless I (re)produce my work on Soueif in a different form, or in different forums, I cannot expect it to count as evidence of my research productivity. As Jo VanEvery has remarked, ‘Scholars lose sight of the fact that academic publishing is about communication. Or, perhaps more accurately, communication appears disconnected from the validation process.’⁴

The Valve exemplified blogging as a collaborative and interdisciplinary forum for developing and testing ideas. More specialized bloggers can also shape their online activities with a particular eye to furthering their research and enhancing their networking with others in their field. In my case, however, my blogging has developed in a less specialized way. I write at *Novel Readings* about *all* of my reading and writing interests, not just those directly related to my expertise in Victorian literature. I also post about my teaching and I would point to that as the other aspect

3. ‘A Novelist in Tahrir Square’, *Open Letters Monthly*, April 2011 <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/a-novelist-in-tahrir-square/>> [accessed 15 February 2012].

4. Jo VanEvery, ‘Communication vs. Validation: Why Are You Publishing?’, *JoVanEvery.ca: Helping you be a better academic*, 2 March 2011 <<http://jovanevery.ca/communication-vs-validation-why-are-you-publishing/>> [accessed 26 February 2012].

of my academic practice that has been most positively affected by blogging. For one thing, since 2007 I have maintained a regular series of posts recording and reflecting on every week's classes. As I wrote at the end of my first year's experience with this exercise,

taking this extra step each week not only helped me identify the purpose, or, if writing retrospectively, the result of each class, but it made each week more interesting by giving me an opportunity to make connections or articulate puzzles or just express pleasure and appreciation in ways that went beyond what I had time for in class. I pursued links between my teaching and my research projects, for example, as well as between my teaching and my other 'non-professional' interests and activities. I articulated ideas suggested by class discussions that otherwise would have sunk again below the surface of my distracted mind. Blogging my teaching enhanced my own experience of teaching.⁵

As well, I have solicited advice on aspects of teaching as concrete as readings or assignment sequences and as abstract as how our teaching spaces reflect and constrain our roles as professors.⁶ Blog posts about my reading and the subsequent discussions have generated entirely new ideas for teaching. This fall, for instance, I will be offering a new course on the 'Somerville novelists', an interest of mine that first took shape across a series of posts that began with my reading of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*.

I could give many more examples of ways my blogging has served both my research and my teaching, but I hope that I have said enough for now to explain my conviction that blogging can be a valuable part of our academic practices. Why is it, then, that blogging is not yet more readily acknowledged as a scholarly activity, much less a legitimate form of scholarly publishing? For years now, after all, people have been making the case that current models of academic publishing are not sustainable. In a 2006 report, the Modern Language Association observed that

the demands placed on candidates for tenure, especially demands for publication, have been expanding in kind and increasing in quantity ... junior faculty members are meeting these ever-growing demands even though this is a time when universities have lowered or eliminated subsidies for scholarly presses and libraries have dramatically reduced their purchases of books in the humanities. And despite a worsening climate for book publication, the monograph has become increasingly important in comparison with other forms of publication.⁷

5. Rohan Maitzen, 'Reflections on Blogging My Teaching', *Novel Readings*, 15 April 2008 <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/reflections-on-blogging-my-teaching-2>> [accessed 22 February 2012].

6. See, for instance, 'Book Order "Bleg": Women and Detective Fiction', or 'Standing in Chartres Cathedral Unmoved', *Novel Readings*, 26 April and 10 November 2010 <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/book-order-bleg-women-and-detective-fiction>> and <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/standing-in-chartres-cathedral-unmoved>> [accessed 26 February 2012].

7. 'Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion' (December 2006) available from <<http://www.mla.org/pdf/taskforcereport0608.pdf>> [accessed 25 February 2012].

What value do we really place on those hard-won publications? In his MLA presidential address in 2002, Stephen Greenblatt remarked that

The problem, according to university presses, is that we are not reading one another as much as we once did – or at least that we are not buying one another’s books and assigning them to our classes. . . . Somewhere over the past decade, our interest in one another’s work – or, again, at least in owning one another’s work – seems to have declined. . . . Our great failure in recent years is not that we no longer write for a general public . . . but that we no longer write for one another⁸

Blogging – free, accessible, interactive – restores immediacy to scholarly discussion, removes logistical roadblocks to knowledge dissemination, and up-ends the communication/validation hierarchy in favour of the open exchange of ideas. Is that not what academic publishing is actually supposed to accomplish? Where does the opposition come from?

Often, the lack of peer review is the first objection raised against taking any self-published work, including blogging, seriously as an academic contribution. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick has convincingly argued, ‘closed peer review processes’ do not serve us very well as scholars and ‘can’t be wholly relied upon for their quality-control functions’:

Arguably, the primary purpose that anonymous peer review actually serves today, at least in the humanities, is that of institutional warranting, of conveying to college and university administrations that the work their employees are doing is appropriate and well-thought-of in its field, and thus that these employees are deserving of ongoing appointments, tenure, promotions, raises, and so forth.⁹

Many academics are perhaps less confident in peer review as a system of quality control than they are dependent on it as a means of what Lindsay Waters of Harvard University Press has called ‘outsourcing’ the work of hiring, tenure and promotion committees. As noted in the MLA report, reliance on external peer review has ‘created the conditions whereby individual departments can practically abdicate their responsibility to review the scholarly work of the very colleagues they have appointed to tenure-track positions’ – conditions which persist despite the manifest difficulties facing academic publishers and journals. The comment threads on blogs model one version of the post-publication peer review many reformers advocate as an alternative.

There is also a lingering prejudice against blogging in particular as a form. As Dan Cohen notes, ‘the genre is still considered by many – especially those in academia – to be the realm of self-involved, insecure, oversexed teens and twentysomethings’.¹⁰ Prominent academics have explicitly distanced themselves from blogging even when

8. Stephen Greenblatt, “‘Stay, Illusion’ – on Receiving Messages from the Dead’, *PMLA*, 118.3 (2003), 417–26.

9. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) <<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence/>> [accessed 27 February 2012].

10. Dan Cohen, ‘Professors, Start Your Blogs’, *DanCohen*, 13 April 2012 <<http://www.dancohen.org/2006/08/21/professors-start-your-blogs/>> [accessed 26 February 2012].

the work they are doing is indistinguishable from it in practice and effect. Princeton professor Jeff Nunokawa's comments about his much-hyped series of Facebook 'essays' (which to any blogger looked just like, well, a blog) are symptomatic:

For the record, [Nunokawa] does not call this a blog, partly, he says, because 'I hate that particular syllable,' but also, more importantly, because 'it doesn't catch what I'm really trying to do, whether successfully or not. These are essays. When I think of a blog – and maybe I'm being unfair to bloggers because I don't spend much time in the blogosphere – my sense of blogs is that that they're written very quickly. This is stuff that I compose and recompose, and then recompose and recompose and recompose. It's very written.'¹¹

In a recent online discussion in the *Guardian* of new directions in academic publishing, Leonard Cassuto remarked,

Another thing about blogging: lots of people with certain reading habits don't read blogs. I have nothing against them, but I don't read them, either. This is as much a function of available time as anything else. By restricting myself to published writing (whether digital or print), I am in effect ascribing value to the gatekeeping function of editors. I don't do this because I'm a snob, but rather because there are only so many hours in a day.¹²

It is especially frustrating when such blanket dismissals come from people who admit not reading blogs themselves. Blogs can be as 'written' as any other texts; the quality of the content is not determined by the form or the platform. As Dan Cohen points out:

Blogs are just like other forms of writing, such as books, in that there's a whole lot of trash out there – and some gems worth reading. It just depends on what you choose to read (or write). And of course many (most? all?) other genres of writing have elements of self-promotion and narcissism. After all, a basic requirement of writing is the (often mistaken) belief that you have something to say that's important.¹³

Even where disdain for the form is not an overriding concern, academics may still hesitate to blog, or (in my experience) even to comment on blogs because they are averse to the public exposure. Alex Reid notes that

Publishing an article in the 'Journal of narrowly-focused humanities studies' is a good way to hide. Those who do manage to find you will probably be sympathetic. Plus you always have the shield of peer-review: clearly someone thought what you said was ok. Even if someone disagrees with you, the differences will likely be on details that very few people will know or care about. Besides, by the time that person manages to write and

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11. Merrell Noden '78, 'Flyin' Hawaiian: On a Campus Full of Large Personalities, "Master Jeff" Has One of the Largest', *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 23 March 2011 <<http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2011/03/23/pages/2737/index.xml?page=2&>>.
 12. 'Live Chat: How to Get Ahead in Academic Publishing', ed. by Eliza Anyangwe, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2011/jun/29/academic-publishing-in-digital-age>> [accessed 26 February 2012].
 13. Cohen, 'Professors, Start Your Blogs'.

publish a response, your article is in the distant past. In any case, this almost never happens. Since 93% of humanities articles are never cited you can safely publish with the assumption that no one will ever mention your article again. Phew!¹⁴

Against these skeptical or simply hesitant perspectives, I offer my own narrative of the positive role blogging has played in my academic and intellectual life, and the testimony of my blog itself. Even though there is no gatekeeper but me, I think it stands up pretty well to scrutiny. It represents, cumulatively, a substantial body of work that I am proud of and that I believe serves the university's central mission: enhancing understanding. Our institutions benefit, and so do we, from the innovation, openness, collaboration and outreach that blogs provide. That seems reason enough to credit them as academic practices.

Rohan Maitzen
Dalhousie University
Rohan.Maitzen@DAL.CA

14. Alex Reid, 'On the Value of Academic Blogging', *Digital Digs*, 5 March 2011 <<http://www.alex-reid.net/2011/03/on-the-value-of-academic-blogging.html>> [accessed 26 February 2012].