Are personal academic blogs a thing of the past?

The personal blog was a defining feature of the early internet and there are still a number of high-profile academic blogs studiously maintained by lone scholars. However, for researchers new to academic blogging, is it still worth setting up your own blog? Reflecting on his own blogging trajectory **Mark Carrigan***, suggests that it may be time to lay the personal academic blog to rest.*

What is academic blogging? This is a question I've asked myself regularly throughout my career. I began blogging in 2003 as an undergraduate student and cycled through a series of blogs hosted by Blogger before moving to WordPress in 2010. I set up a multi-author blog, The Sociological Imagination, with my friend Milena Kremakova, which ran until 2017. We once described this somewhat eclectic site as Brainpickings for Sociologists in the sense that it was a curated mix of things from elsewhere on the internet that we felt other sociologists might find interesting. The full archive of the site is available in a slightly unwieldy PDF here. In the same year I established a personal blog, which I've maintained over the past 12 years encompassing 4593 posts across a wide range of topics, ranging from quick comments on links and videos, through to long form essays. Looking back through my posts, I can see my PhD and two monographs taking shape, but I can also see a whole host of other topics, which never become part of my 'formal' work.

Blogging has been the central means through which I've developed a distinctive outlook as a researcher, providing me with an open-ended invitation to reflect on what I've been reading, analysing, organising and teaching. I've been doing it for so long that I find it hard to imagine what it would like to be an academic without a blog. I've always identified with Cory Doctorow's description of his blog as, an outboard brain that gives his "knowledge-grazing direction and reward", enabling him to file away the things which spark his curiosity as he wanders around the internet. Blogging in this style has often been compared to a commonplace book in which readers record material relating to a common topic. In this sense a blog can be a sophisticated platform for compiling commonplace books, enhanced by the ease with which text, images and videos can be combined in a post. There are many other ways academics can use a blog, but this is the one which most obviously involves knowledge production, linking together the scholarship taking place within universities to the everyday forms of scholarship without.

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Blogging also enables commonplace books to be *shared*, making this deeply personal mode of knowledge production available to others in an implicit invitation for dialogue. This sometimes takes the form of comments, reflecting on what you've shared, suggesting related threads to follow up and subjecting you to abuse (occasionally if you're a white middle class male, less occasionally if you're not). A frequent experience for long-term bloggers are posts resurfacing, seemingly at random, with a long forgotten contribution suddenly receiving significant traffic. This is a thought provoking occurrence in which the sudden discovery of a fragment (or a shift in search engine indexing making it more visible) forces you to confront what you had in practice lost. Even if you don't reread the post, the simple fact of it registering in your blog stats reminds you of the fact you were once interested enough to write it.

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If you blog in this way, then your capacity to retrieve posts becomes just as important as sharing them. I often find myself retrieving posts in conversations with collaborators, recalling fragments that relate to what we're doing, even if I didn't perceive any connection at the time of writing. This is driven through the mechanisms of the blog itself: the categories used to organise posts and the tags used to render them more easily navigable. I have a messy collection of overlapping tags, built up over the years, bringing together fragments in ways that feel immensely productive when I'm working on projects. For example, I've been collecting posts under the tag social media for academics since 2012, which cut across the writing of two monographs. I've used this tag every time I post something relevant to the topic and this has left me with a sequential index of relevant thoughts and useful findings that I've consulted when planning chapters. It's a place to store sources, but it's also a first draft to be picked up and formalised later.

I hope this conveys the enthusiasm of long-term bloggers. My experience is that it's an immensely useful resource with a direct relationship between the amount you put into it and the amount you get out of it. For a long time I imagined that a research blog might even become as ubiquitous as a notebook, an indispensable tool of the trade through which, as C Wright Mills put it, researchers in the humanities and social sciences might 'keep their file'. However, from the vantage point of 2022 it is clear this is no closer to happening than it was when the idea first occurred to me. In fact, personal academic blogs seem to be in decline.

Some of the reasons for this are obvious. It's perceived as a time consuming activity (correctly, if you expect to attract an audience), which makes it undesirable within an academy defined by chronic rushing. There's an understandable fear that sharing so openly might facilitate the stealing of ideas and leave one open to personal abuse. The manner in which social media has consumed online attention also means that it's become harder to build an audience through blogging alone. The traffic platforms *can* direct often proves fickle and fleeting, at least compared to the reliable relationships with audiences that defined an earlier phase of academic blogging. This contributes to a sense of personal blogs as being unfashionable relics from an earlier era of the web, struggling to win attention in the cacophonous media landscape of 2022. The rapid growth of newsletter platforms like TinyLetter and Substack further illustrate how there's still an audience for long form written content, but the older model of following blogs is getting squeezed out by privatised push delivery via e-mail.

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It benefited my career to be a blogger, both in terms of supporting my research productivity, as someone who has rarely been employed as a researcher, as well as in the more nebulous sense of increasing my visibility amongst academic communities. There was a virtuous circle between blogging as *personal knowledge managemen*t and blogging as a *personal web presence*: little fragments of my thinking would circulate round the internet and bring people to a site where they could learn about me and my work. It's precisely this relationship which feels like it's breaking down in my own practice, as a new generation of knowledge management systems such as Obsidian, LogSeq and Roam offer far more powerful ways of assembling what you've learned in order to recall it later. For the last year I've been haphazardly cross posting between Roam and my blog with the vague sense that one is a private database and the other is a public database. But it's clearly Roam which is my real knowledge base, with my blog relegated to a public-facing artefact that I'm maintaining for largely nostalgic purposes at this point. There are vastly superior knowledge management systems now available and if you cease to use a personal blog for this function, then it becomes a strangely time consuming way to maintain a personal web presence.

The fact I'm writing this in the form of a blog post is however the best indicator that academic blogging is far from dead. There's a thriving ecosystem of multi-author blogs, online magazines and publication projects that have vastly expanded the range of forums in which academics can publish short form content, faster than would ever be possible through the journal system and to more diverse audiences. The manner in which many senior academics will talk about 'writing a blog' (it's been years and I still have to restrain myself from interjecting with 'post') as part of their research lifecycle is testament to the success of blogging in this collective mode. However, I can't help but wonder if personal blogs are now largely a thing of the past, a missed opportunity by which we could have established a more collaborative, public and reflexive approach to knowledge production.

Image Credit: LSE Impact Blog.

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