Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » The Perils Of Anonymity

PhDinHistory[1], we hardly knew ye. A blogger who came out of nowhere to write interesting, thorough analyses of the state of academia and trends in history, captured my attention from the first post and eventually garnered a much wider audience. Then suddenly, this weekend, PhDinHistory deleted his or her WordPress account. No goodbye post and static archive of the blog, but rather a full deletion that made it impossible to read or link to the blog forever. I didn't always agree with PhDinHistory, but as a blogger who also wanted to write more in-depth pieces[2] rather than quick blogish ones (although more recently I have cheated by adding into my feed smaller posts from ma.gnolia[3]), I truly respected the effort that went into this new blog. From the beginning, however, I thought there was one major problem with PhDinHistory's blog: its anonymity.
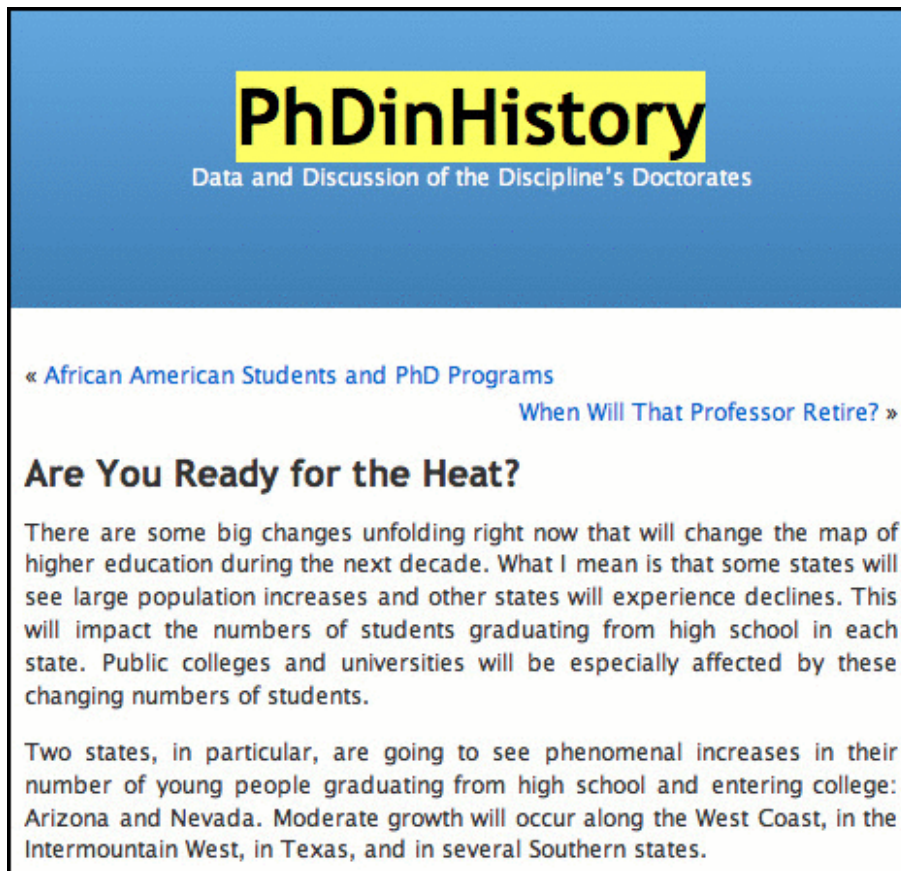
PhDinHistory's rise and fall demonstrates, I believe, one of the principles

I've outlined about academic blogging[4]: we shouldn't use pseudonyms. PhDinHistory may have been a thoughtful blogger, but he or she created a unnecessary distraction by writing under a pseudonym. It might come as a shock to PhDinHistory, but there was almost nothing on his or her blog that was an affront to other students or professors, or that would have been a problem when he or she came on the job market. When PhDinHistory wrote about possible upcoming vacancies in history departments, he or she was simply analyzing the statistics of age and fields of concentration, not proposing to off tenured professors. Besides, professors know that graduate students are constantly mulling over schemes to get dream jobs—we were grad students once, too. It's actually refreshing to see such speculation out in the open, and with numbers to boot.

Moreover, as I noted in "Professors, Start Your Blogs[5]," by writing under his or her own name, PhDinHistory would have gained the "responsibility and credit" that goes along with attribution. Both are important. It's too bad that PhDinHistory will never receive proper credit for months of hard work and many thought-provoking articles. At the same time, I think that the responsibility that goes along with attribution actually would have strengthened, not weakened, PhDinHistory's blog. I assume PhDinHistory thought that anonymity would be liberating and allow for the fullest latitude on the blog. But writing with attribution would have allowed PhDinHistory to truly join in a conversation with other (non-anonymous) academics. It also would have helpfully tempered some of the more speculative posts. As poets know, total freedom makes for some bad verses.

PhDinHistory thought that there was peril in writing under his or her real name, but it turned out that the opposite was true—it was the pseudonym that was the real peril. All it did—as PhDinHistory admitted to Rob Townsend[6] of the American Historical Association—was to create a contest to see who could unmask the mystery blogger. As the pursuers closed in, PhDinHistory unfortunately had to stop blogging.

The pseudonym was counterproductive, and in PhDinHistory's case, completely unnecessary. I am undoubtedly not alone in wanting PhDinHistory to return to the blogosphere. The solution to his or her

quandary is clear to me, as it is to many others. Simply relaunch the blog under his or her own name and—as hard as this may be—stop worrying. We professors know you don't really want us to meet an untimely end.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, July 10th, 2007 at 10:47 am and is filed under Academia[7], Blogs[8]. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0[9] feed. You can leave a response[10], or trackback[11] from your own site.

References

1. ^ PhDinHistory (phdinhistory.wordpress.com)
2. ^ wanted to write more in-depth pieces (www.dancohen.org)
3. ^ ma.gnolia (ma.gnolia.com)
4. ^ the principles I've outlined about academic blogging (www.dancohen.org)
5. ^ Professors, Start Your Blogs (www.dancohen.org)
6. ^ admitted to Rob Townsend (blog.historians.org)
7. ^ View all posts in Academia (www.dancohen.org)
8. ^ View all posts in Blogs (www.dancohen.org)
9. ^ RSS 2.0 (www.dancohen.org)
10. ^ leave a response (www.dancohen.org)
11. ^ trackback (www.dancohen.org)

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http://www.dancohen.org/2007/07/10/the-perils-of-anonymity/