

Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Professors, Start Your Blogs

With a new school year about to begin, I want to reach out to other professors (and professors-to-be, i.e., graduate students) to try to convince more of them to start their own blogs. It's the perfect time to start a blog, and many of the reasons academics state for not having a blog are, I believe, either red herrings or just plain false. So first, let me counter some biases and concerns I hear from a lot of my peers (and others in the ivory tower) when the word "blog" is mentioned.

Despite the fact that tens of millions of people now have blogs, the genre is still considered by many—especially those in academia—to be the realm of self-involved, insecure, oversexed teens and twentysomethings. To be sure, there are plenty of blogs that trace the histrionics of adolescence and its long, tortured aftermath. And there's no denying that other blogs cover such fascinating, navel-gazing topics as one man's love of his breakfast^[1] (preferably eggs Benedict, if you must know). And—before I throw too many stones in this glass house—I too have indulged in the occasional narcissistic act in this column (not to mention the “shameless plug” for my book, *Digital History*^[2], in the right column of my home page).

But this common criticism of the genre of the blog has begun to ring hollow. As Bryan Alexander^[3] of the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education^[4] recently noted at a meeting I attended on emerging web technologies and higher education, a remarkably wide range of blog styles and genres now exist—including many noteworthy examples by professors. There are blogs by historians providing commentary on current events^[5], blogs by journalism professors dissecting mass media coverage of health news^[6], and blogs by whole academic departments, like Saint Cloud State University's astronomy department^[7].

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.

Second, no rule book mandates that one adopt the writing style of a hormone-crazed college student. Professors, especially those in the humanities, have spent a great deal of their lives learning how to write prose, and to write in a variety of styles for different purposes: monographs, popular works, reviews, lectures to students, presentations to colleagues. For this blog I've adopted a plainspoken prose style with (I hope) a little humor here and there to lighten the occasional technically complex post. I've also carefully avoided the use of extreme adjectives and hyperbole that are common on the blogs the academic critics love to hate. I'm proud to say I've used only a handful of exclamation points so far. This "casual rationalist" voice is but one option among many, but it's a style I've crafted to disarm those who believe that blogs can be nothing but trouble for the careers of graduate students and professors.

Another factor that has distanced professors from blogs was anonymity. Most early blogs, and especially the ones the media liked to cover, were anonymous or pseudonymous. But I would say that the vast majority of new blogs are clearly attributed (even if they have odd monikers, unlike the boring [dancohen.org](http://www.dancohen.org)). Attribution and its associated goods, such as responsibility and credit, should make academics feel better about the genre.

Moreover, as I pointed out when I began this blog last year, a blog is really just a series of "posts" (whatever those are; I began the post you're reading by calling it an "article," because at almost 2,000 words it feels less like a post-it note than a legal pad). There's no blogging requirement to discuss botox or baked beans or boyfriends, or to write short, snarky bits rather than long, balanced, thoughtful essays. A failure to

understand this simple point has kept too many serious folks like professors on the sidelines as the blogosphere has exponentially expanded.

The addition of professorial blogs to the web will enrich the medium greatly. The critics of blogging are perhaps onto something when they note that the blogosphere has too many people writing on too few topics (does the world really need another blog on the latest moves of Apple Computer?). Although they frequently teach broad, introductory courses, professors are hired and promoted because they are specialists who discover and explain things that few others understand. For these theorists and researchers, blogging can be a powerful way to provide “notes from the field” and glosses on topics that perhaps a handful of others worldwide know a lot about. While I tend to avoid the hot term of the moment, professors are the true masters of the “long tail” of knowledge.

When I was in graduate school, the Russian historian Paul Bushkovitch once told me that the key to being a successful scholar was to become completely obsessed with a historical topic, to feel the urge to read and learn everything about an event, an era, or a person. In short, to become so knowledgeable and energetic about your subject matter that you become what others immediately recognize as a trusted, valuable expert.

As it turns out, blogs are perfect outlets for obsession. Now, there's good and bad obsession. What the critics of blogs are worried about is the bad kind—the obsession that drives people to write about their breakfast in excruciating detail.

Yet, as Bushkovitch's comment entailed, obsession—properly channeled and focused on a worthy subject—has its power. It forges experts. It stimulates a lifelong interest in learning (think, for a moment, about the countless examples of “retired” professors still writing influential books). The most stimulating, influential professors, even those with more traditional outlets for their work (like books and journals) overflow with

views and thoughts. Shaped correctly, a blog can be a perfect place for that extra production of words and ideas. The Chronicle of Higher Education may love to find examples of Ph.D.s losing a tenure-track job^[8] because of their tell-all (anonymous) blogs, but I suspect that in the not too distant future the right type of blog—the blog that shows how a candidate has full awareness of what's going on in a field and has potential as a thought leader in it—will become an asset not to be left off one's CV.

The best bloggers inevitably become a nexus for information exchange in their field. Take, for instance, Lorcan Dempsey's blog^[9] on matters relating to libraries and digital technology. It has become a touchstone for many in his field—my estimate is that he has a *thousand* subscribers who get updates from his blog *daily*. Overall, I suspect his blog has more actual readers than some print publications in his field. Looking for influence? A large blog audience is as good as a book or seminal article. A good blog provides a platform to frame discussions on a topic and point to resources of value.

Altruistic reasons for writing a blog also beckon. Writing a blog lets you reach out to an enormous audience beyond academia. Some professors may not want that audience, but I believe it's part of our duty as teachers, experts, and public servants. It's great that the medium of the web has come along to enable that communication at low cost.

Concerned about someone stealing your ideas if you post them to a blog? Don't. Unless you decide otherwise, you have the same copyright on words you write on a blog as those published on paper. And you have the precedence that comes with making those words public far earlier than they would appear in a journal or book.

Worried about the time commitment involved in writing a blog? The constant pressure to post something daily or weekly? This was my stumbling block a year ago when I was thinking of starting a blog. I'm busy; we're all busy. What I've found, however, is that writing a blog

does not have to take a lot of time. Promoters of blogs often tell prospective bloggers it's critical to post frequently and reliably. Nonsense. Such advice misunderstands what's so great about RSS (Really Simply Syndication), the underlying technology of blogs that notifies people when you have a new post. RSS "pushes" new material to readers no matter the interval between posts. RSS is thus perfect for busy people with blogs who are naturally inconsistent or infrequent in their posting schedule. If you post every day, then readers can just visit your site daily; if you post six times a year, randomly (when you really have something to say), RSS is the technology for you. Without it, no one would ever remember to visit your website.

RSS also allows aggregation of blog "feeds" so that by mixing together a number of RSS files an audience can track the goings-on in a field in a single view. I would love to see a hundred historians of Victorian science have blogs to which they post quarterly. That would mean an average of one thoughtful post a day on a subject in which I'm greatly interested.

For those who need further prodding to get past these worries and biases, blogging as we know it (or don't know it, if you are unfamiliar with the use of RSS "news readers") is about to change. Seamless support for RSS is now being written into the most commonly used software: email programs and web browsers. Rather than having to figure out how to manage subscriptions to blogs in a news reader or on an off-putting "Web 2.0" site, the average user will find soon find new posts along with their email, or beckoning them from within their browser. And new versions of Blogger^[10] and other blog software has made it easier than ever to start a blog. In other words, blogs are about to become much more accessible and integrated into our digital lives.

Now, I'm aware the irony of imploring, on a blog, professors who don't have a blog to start a blog. I fear I'm preaching to the choir here. Surely the subscribers to this blog's feed are blog-savvy already, and many undoubtedly have their own blogs. So I need your help: please tell other professors or professors-to-be about this post, or forward the URL for

the post to appropriate email lists or forums (if you're worried that the long URL is difficult to cite, here's a tiny URL that will redirect to this page: <http://tinyurl.com/ptsje>^[11]).

But wait—haven't I just asked you to be an accomplice in a shameless, narcissistic act typical of blogs? Perhaps.

This entry was posted on Monday, August 21st, 2006 at 3:20 pm and is filed under [Academia](#)^[12], [Blogs](#)^[13]. You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#)^[14] feed. You can [leave a response](#)^[15], or [trackback](#)^[16] from your own site.

References

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