The Role of the Editor of an Academic Publication Blog

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Abstract

Academic blogging is now a widely used medium for scholarly communication. A substantial body of literature exists on the potential opportunities and challenges that blogging affords to scholars, yet the role of blog editors in facilitating research dissemination and public engagement remains largely overlooked. This paper draws on insights from the development of academic blogs by the London School of Economics between 2010 and 2020. It discusses the demands on blog editors and sets forth a framework in which academic institutions and scholars can support editors in their efforts to realize the benefits of academic blogging.

Keywords: academic blogging, blog editors, multi-author blogs, online publishing.

Introduction

Academic blogging has existed in a variety of forms since the 1990s, yet there remains a tendency to regard the activity as something of a novelty for scholarly communication. Debates about blogging often center on the question of whether the practice is worthwhile for academics, with pro-blogging contributions sometimes limited to offering strategies to promote blogging against the potential scepticism of others.[1] This paper seeks instead to explore an important, but largely overlooked, aspect of academic blogging: the function played by the editors of academic blogs.

Editorial staff play a crucial role in many centrally administered blogging platforms hosted by universities or other organizations; these platforms frequently invite submissions from both authors affiliated with the host institution and those affiliated elsewhere. This model of blogging has become increasingly common in recent years. It offers some clear advantages for authors, such as the ability to reach a larger audience than would likely be possible with a personal blog.[2] At the institutional level, blogs also present opportunities for the host organization to increase its online presence in much the same way that a university press can provide a university with reputational benefits.[3]

As with most forms of academic publishing, the value of blogging depends on the quality of the editorial work that underpins it. Without effective editorial control, it would be impossible for blogs to develop meaningful publication agendas, maintain academic standards, or promote content effectively to the intended audience. Yet the contributions of the editorial staff who provide this service are largely unexplored in the literature on academic blogging. Moreover, there are currently no widely adopted best practices when it comes to the duties that blog editors perform or the sort of individuals who should assume the role. Some blog editors are full-time professionals with substantial publishing experience and expertise in the academic discipline covered by the blog. Such editors may be expected to undertake informed reviews of submissions and propose extensive edits to drafts. In other instances, these editorial responsibilities are assigned to existing administrative staff or are carried out on a voluntary basis by students or researchers.

This paper takes the view that if the full benefits of academic blogging are to be realized, it is necessary to understand how the editorial processes behind academic blogs function in practice. To meet this aim, the first section of the paper provides an overview of academic blogging and the role of blog editors. The second section draws on insights from the development of academic blogs by the London School of Economics, which has established a significant academic blogging platform over the last decade. The final section develops a framework of best practices, detailing how academic institutions can empower academic blog editors to realize the benefits of blogging.

Academic Blogging and the Role of Blog Editors

The term *academic blogging* can refer a range of endeavours, spanning from informal comments posted by individual academics to professional publications that rival the scope and influence of outputs such as conference papers, journal articles, and books.[4] Generally speaking, blogs can be sorted into three types, with the caveat that substantial overlap exists among them.[5]

First, there are *personal blogs*, which serve as an outlet for contributions by a single academic. This form of blogging is often indistinguishable from the way blogs are used in non-academic contexts, but a personal blog can also act as a platform for research outputs. Such websites are managed by an academic directly and are free from editorial input or formal peer review.[6] This model has the advantage of granting a scholar full discretion in determining the content of posts. A downside to the model is that unless the academic has a substantial reputation, the potential audience for a single-author blog is likely to be smaller than that associated with other publication channels.[7] A personal blog also makes relatively high demands on a scholar to provide a steady stream of content if an audience is to be maintained.[8] Previous analyses of academic blogging have estimated that up to 80 per cent of single-author academic blogs become inactive within the first few years after they are established.[9]

A second type of academic blogging is the *organizational blog*. In contrast to personal blogs, the primary aim of an organizational blog is to provide updates on ongoing activities of the organization. Blogs of this type may be used by the central administration of a university or by individual departments to explain policy changes or to issue announcements to staff and students.[10] Many of these blogs perform functions that were once provided by other forms of communication, such as printed newsletters. A related subtype is a *project blog*, which is set up by a research team to provide news concerning a research project; the project blog is usually active for only as long as the project lasts. It is now relatively common for a project blog budget to be built into a funding proposal as a tool for increasing the visibility and impact of research.

A third type might be termed a *publication blog*. Such a blog parallels the approach of established serial publications by inviting contributions from a variety of contributors and by regularly issuing research articles, commentary, book reviews, or other substantive pieces. As a publishing format, a publication blog sits at the intersection between academic journals and newspapers. Like journals, a publication blog may include a review before an article is accepting for posting, although formal peer review of blog content remains relatively rare. Like newspapers, a publication blog is generally committed to quick turnarounds and so is well suited to issuing time-sensitive material, such as coverage of current affairs. Publication blogs are almost never located behind a paywall, which is an advantage for increasing the visibility of their content. They are often run by universities, but several research groups and media companies have also set up platforms for academic contributors that take a similar approach.[11]

Publication blogs that are centrally administered by a university offer a useful complement to existing modes of institutional communication.[12] A university's press release to promote the research achievements of faculty and staff, for instance, can be made more effective if a blog post outlining the key findings of the research can be issued concurrently. Publication blogs can also serve as independent channels of communication, at times supplanting traditional approaches to publication. Some universities that lack a large university press, such as the London School of Economics, have launched publication blogs as an alternative platform for disseminating research.

The benefits of publication blogs depend on effective editing. An overview of the tasks associated with editing a publication blog begins with *commissioning content*. While it may be possible for a publication blog to publish only unsolicited submissions, it is usually necessary for the editor to approach authors directly. Unlike commercial media outlets, academic blogs generally lack the financial resources to pay authors for their contributions. What is more, academic blogs are unable to attract authors with the kind of career-enhancing opportunities that come from publishing a paper in a peer-reviewed journal or presenting at a prestigious conference. Much of the work of an editor is therefore likely to be recruiting contributors.

The second major function of a blog editor is *reviewing submissions*. Perhaps the most common criticism of blogging as an alternative outlet for research dissemination is the absence of peer review comparable to that practiced by leading academic journals; the absence makes quality control difficult.[13] This is far from a trivial concern: aside from undermining the credibility of academic expertise, poor-quality publications can do substantial social harm if they spread misinformation or undermine public trust.[14] The only recourse available to most blogs is to rely on the expertise of their editors, who must be capable of making quick decisions on diverse contributions. In making their decisions, editors may be able to draw on the experience of an editorial board with specialist knowledge.

Third, editors of publication blogs must typically take a hands-on approach to *editing and proofreading contributions* if academic standards are to be maintained. Academic journals often rely on indirect editorial processes, in which suggested revisions are relayed to authors, who revise and resubmit their manuscript for additional review. While it is possible to adopt a similar process for a publication blog, rounds of review and revision would make quick turnarounds impossible and thus threaten the regular release of content. Depending on how strict a blog's editorial standards are, editing and proofreading posts can entail a significant amount of work for editors, particularly when they must simplify technical research for a non-specialist audience. Editors are also typically responsible for the framing of posts by writing titles, bylines, and abstracts. Previous research has demonstrated that the quality of this framing can have a substantial impact on how much the content gets shared on social media.[15]

Fourth, blog editors are responsible for *managing a website* or, at the very least, managing the process by delegating the work to colleagues. Academic blogs commonly rely on commercial content management systems such as WordPress, but some blogs use bespoke website templates that make greater demands on the technical expertise of editors. In any case, a degree of digital literacy is required of the editor, and some understanding of web development, HTML, and CSS provides a distinct advantage. Some notably time-consuming tasks include sourcing and editing images, which is especially taxing when a blog does not have a subscription to image libraries. In the absence of a subscription, free-to-use images of the required quality have to be found through online searching, and a great degree of care must be taken to avoid copyright violations, which can have legal consequences for the host organization.[16]

Fifth, academic blog editors are responsible for *promoting content*. While email lists were once the dominant means of bringing an audience to a blog, the bulk of promotion activities today focuses on social media. Virtually all well-read academic blogs have a significant social media presence, especially on Twitter.[17] Many blog editors manage social media accounts directly, as it is relatively rare for an academic blog hosted by a university to have dedicated social media staff available for this purpose.

Finally, *practicing diplomacy* is required of academic blog editors. Any proposed edits to a contribution will have to be agreed to by authors, which can necessitate a degree of tact and compromise in handling disagreements. Academic blogs can also receive complaints from readers, who may be academics or other stakeholders, particularly when a blog covers sensitive topics. When comment sections are built into blogs, they are usually moderated to comply with a comment policy, and this task falls into the remit of editors.

This overview of the demands of editing a publication blog illustrates the breadth of skills the job requires. Editors must be effective *salespeople* if they are to secure enough content to publish on a consistent schedule; they must be competent *peer reviewers* if they are to maintain quality control; they must be highly capable *proofreaders and editors* who can convert complex material into digestible content; they must be *website managers* with some degree of technical knowledge; they must be skilled at the *online promotion of content* via social media and other channels to ensure the blog reaches a wide audience; and they must be *diplomats* when responding to concerns from authors, readers, and other stakeholders. If the editorial work in any one of these areas is substandard, then it is unlikely that a publication blog will achieve all its goals.

Blogging at the London School of Economics

To illustrate how editorial responsibilities play out in practice, this section draws on insights from the academic blogging platforms established by the London School of Economics (LSE) between 2010 and 2020. During this period, LSE developed a substantial network of academic blogs, broadly covering politics, economics, and the social sciences. Most of these blogs share some common features, namely, a commitment to issuing regularly scheduled content from academics and other experts from within and outside the university. Excluding organizational blogs focused on internal communications, LSE had over forty active blogs by the end of 2020, which together published from 300 to 400 original posts, on average, per month.[18] The reach of the LSE blogs is substantial. A 2017 study of the tweeting patterns of some 45,000 academics and scientists ranked LSE blogs among the top twenty sources of academic content shared on Twitter.[19] The LSE blogs ranked thirteenth, ahead of major commercial academic publishers such as Springer and Taylor & Francis. LSE blogs were the most shared source of academic content for political scientists overall, the third most shared source of academic content for sociologists, and the fifth most shared for economists.

Blogging at LSE was initially established as an internal communication tool by the university's Centre for Learning Technology (CLT) – an academic and professional development service that promotes the use of technological innovation by LSE staff members. However, the first publication blogs were pioneered by an independent research organisation affiliated with the university, the LSE Public Policy Group, using the CLT's Wordpress template. The first LSE publication blog, *Election Experts*, was set up as a temporary outlet for academics to provide commentary on the 2010 UK general election, but the success of this platform encouraged the Public Policy Group to create a permanent publication blog dedicated to UK politics, *British Politics and Policy at LSE*, together with six additional blogs covering a range of additional topics: *EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, Impact of Social Sciences, LSE Brexit, LSE Business Review, LSE Review of Books,* and *USAPP – American Politics and Policy.* Each blog is managed by a full-time editor and was set up with funding secured from a variety of short-term streams including grant funds tied to research projects, departmental matching, and fixed-term knowledge exchange and impact funding from external sources such as the UK's Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF).[20] With the exception of *LSE Business Review*, which is still managed by the Public Policy Group, these blogs have now been relocated into core departments across the university.[21]

From this starting point, the number of LSE blogs increased substantially, with other departments and research projects establishing their own blogs. Although this rapid multiplication of blogs has largely been driven by staff working independently at different departments, the university has played a crucial supporting role by establishing a pool of organizational resources for blog editors. There is strong commitment from the university's management to help grow the platform, a home page on the university's website from which each of the blogs can be accessed,[22] and a broad range of assistance provided by central university services.[23] While short-term funding arrangements remain the norm for most of the LSE blogs, there has been a coordinated approach from central university management to help departments secure funding for editors from both internal and external sources.

Among the LSE blogs, there is substantial variation in the editorial arrangements and the volume of content produced. At the end of 2020, ten blogs had full-time editorial staff, including the seven blogs established by the Public Policy Group. These ten blogs account for the greatest volume of content and have the largest reach in terms of readership.[24] Of the remaining blogs, editorial responsibilities are undertaken either by appointed blog editors on part-time contracts, or by staff with an existing role within a department such as communications officers. A meeting of editors from across the school takes place monthly, through which some degree of coordinating activities and sharing best practices can occur.

Many of the tasks undertaken by LSE blog editors are related to commissioning content. There are several strategies for doing this. A common strategy is to subscribe to updates from relevant academic journals and contact authors of newly published research with a view to publishing an accompanying blog piece. While this is often done independently of journal editors, there are a few examples of LSE blogs establishing direct relationships with journals, including some formal publishing agreements. Alternatively, commissioning can be centered on a topic, with blog editors drafting a list of topical issues and seeking to recruit established experts to provide a comment article. There are also articles published in relation to events held at the university, including transcribed interviews with event participants that are usually conducted by blog editors. Similarly, there is a high level of integration with the activities of academic departments, with blogs often being used to amplify research conducted by LSE staff.

The success rate for commissioning tends to be substantially greater when editors ask authors to blog about a recent publication of theirs; this is perhaps unsurprising given the promotional benefit for authors who want to increase the visibility of their research. Although less assured of success, topic-based commissioning often produces a greater impact and is viewed as a priority by blog editors. In addition, some of the more established LSE blogs receive a large number of unsolicited submissions. These blogs are less likely to dedicate as much time to commissioning, but there is a general recognition by editors that the work they put into commissioning can lead to better content than would be possible by relying on unsolicited submissions alone.

The review processes used by the LSE blogs are built on the expertise of their editors. Of the seven publication blogs listed on the LSE blogs home page as the 'most popular' blogs across the university, four are currently managed by editors with a PhD in the subject covered by the blog, and one editor is a doctoral student. The other two most popular blogs are managed by editors with substantial publishing and blogging experience. In all these cases, the editors are established professionals employed full-time to work on the blog, and each blog also has an editorial board of senior experts who can lend support in difficult review decisions. Alongside reviewing submissions, the editing of drafted articles is generally viewed as one of the more time-consuming tasks in editing a blog. Common problems include articles that are substantially above the word limit (which for most blogs is around 1000 words), the need to perform extensive language editing, and the conversion of figures and tables to meet the requirements of the website. The time spent editing an individual article can range from less than thirty minutes to several hours. Edits are usually done directly by editorial staff rather than being referred back to authors.

In the vast majority of cases, blog editors also take on full responsibility for website management. This includes inputting articles into the site dashboard, sourcing images, and ensuring that all content is in an appropriate format. There is, however, a dedicated information technology team available at the university to deal with technical problems. Only a handful of LSE blogs have subscriptions to commercial image libraries, which significantly reduces the time spent finding images. All of the LSE's blogs run on WordPress, and there is a customized article template used across the university. A featured image is a requirement of this template, which means that every post must include at least one good-quality image. Although editors are largely from a social sciences background, many also have at least some experience with web development.

The promotion of content is, after the review and editing of articles, the task that requires the most input from editors. All the blogs have a Twitter account, and most have a Facebook page. Articles are promoted via these platforms on a daily basis, but many blogs have a wider social media strategy of promoting previously published articles, sharing news from the academic community, or cross-publicizing other projects and events at the university. A great deal of work is also focused on using analytics to develop social media strategies.

When it comes to the diplomacy required to edit an LSE blog, editors' experiences are mixed. Most find that authors are largely willing to accept edits to their work, with only rare instances of major disagreements. However, for LSE blogs with a substantial focus on politics, moderating comments and dealing with complaints is a frequent task for the editors. Comments tend to be more negative than positive. The debates that take place in the comment section of a blog are usually less substantive than debates on social media about a post's content.

The editors also receive email complaints about their blogs. In a rather extreme case, two LSE blog articles covered a military conflict from the respective viewpoints of the two states involved. Despite the fact that both articles were written by established academics and conformed to the blog's editorial standards, the editor received more than fifty email complaints from both sides and hundreds of negative comments were left that questioned the decision to publish the content. This experience gives evidence that maintaining editorial standards is not enough to avoid complaints. Blog editors are likely to run blogs as open platforms with a commitment to academic freedom only when there is strong organizational support of the kind that was provided by the university in this instance.

Establishing a Framework for Best Practices

The experiences of the LSE's blog editors suggest several lessons for how scholars and host institutions can support editorial staff in realizing the benefits of academic blogging. The first step in achieving this is to recognize the unique demands made on an academic blog editor. The functions performed by the editor are vitally important to a publication blog's success, yet this work remains largely invisible to external audiences. This feeds into a widely held perception that academic blogs can be implemented without having the same level of editorial expertise required for other forms of publishing, such as scholarly journals and newspapers. Correcting this misunderstanding would go some way toward strengthening the foundations of blogging platforms and enabling more scholars to take advantage of the opportunities blogging can provide.

Second, host institutions must be clear on what the aims of a new blog are and provide adequate resources accordingly. Blogs with limited goals, such as a project blog that provides infrequent updates on progress, are unlikely to require professional editors. However, if the aim is to establish an ambitious publication blog with high levels of quality control and a wide reach, there is little alternative but to invest in editorial staff who have the skills required to make it happen. It is crucial that organizations have realistic expectations about what a blog can achieve without this level of investment.

Third, academic publication blogs and their host institutions should seek to develop consistent models for ensuring quality control, which will necessarily differ from the peer-review processes of academic journals and scholarly book publishers. The central component is a blog editor with substantial knowledge of the blog's subject areas and a board of external experts who can be called on during review. The speed at which academic publication blogs can publish submitted articles is a major strength that must be maintained, but academic publications must be credible too, and only a suitable review system can guarantee this.

Fourth, where possible, synergies should be created with other staff at the host institution to improve the quality of blogs. The business sector has long recognized that tasks such as website management and social media promotion draw on distinct skill sets and are best managed by specialized departments. In the case of publication blogs, in contrast, a diverse range of tasks—specialist academic review, language editing, website management, and online promotion—are often conducted by a single person. There are ample opportunities for host organizations to draw on their resources to enlarge the reach of their blogs, for instance by drawing on existing social media teams in relevant university offices. This may come in tandem with a broader shift toward mainstreaming academic blogs as a key element of the marketing and communication strategies of universities. A centrally funded publication blog with substantial organizational resources to draw on stands a far greater chance of success than one that is managed independently at the initiative of a small editorial team.

Finally, if blogs are envisaged as an unbiased platform, then there must be sufficient organizational backing to ensure that editors are capable of maintaining this commitment. There must be awareness that the editor of a publication blog may encounter frequent criticism, and it is challenging to act as a protector of academic freedom without institutional support. This is particularly true when blogs cover divisive issues in politics and current affairs, but the same holds for all academic disciplines. If blog editors lack this support, they may reason that it would be beneficial to avoid controversial topics altogether. This carries the risk of excluding academic contributions on topics that need them the most.[25]

Conclusion

If academic blogging is to make true on its promise as a platform for scholarly communication, then it will do so in no small part through the work of the editorial staff who commission, review, edit, and promote the contributions of academics. This paper highlighted the challenges that come with providing these editorial services and the role that host institutions can play in helping blog platforms meet their aims. While blogging is no longer a new activity in academia, it remains a distinctly underdeveloped one. A necessary first step in aiding its development will be to recognize and support the editors who help make it possible.

About the author

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[1] Mark Carrigan, 'Some Thoughts on Blogging during a Pandemic,' blog, 25 August 2020, https://markcarrigan.net/2020/08/25/some-thoughts-on-blogging-during-a-pandemic/.

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[5] Inger Mewburn and Pat Thomson, 'Why Do Academics Blog? An Analysis of Audiences, Purposes and Challenges,' *Studies in Higher Education* 38, no. 8 (2013): 1105–19.

[6] Simon Bastow, Patrick Dunleavy, and Jane Tinkler, *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How Academics and Their Research Make a Difference* (London: Sage, 2014).

[7] Marti A. Hearst and Susan T. Dumais, 'Blogging Together: An Examination of Group Blogs,' in *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 3, no. 1 (2009), https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/13976.

[8] It is worth mentioning that some academics blog infrequently yet maintain highly active social media accounts with a large number of followers. This allows blog articles to reach a wide audience even if the site itself is seldom updated.

[9] Patrick Dunleavy and Chris Gilson, 'Five Minutes with Patrick Dunleavy and Chris Gilson: "Blogging Is Quite Simply, One of the Most Important Things That an Academic Should Be Doing Right Now,"' *Impact of Social Sciences Blog*, 24 February 2012,

https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/02/24/five-minutes-patrick-dunleavy-chris-gilson/.

[10] Similarly, most major university presses now run blogs to help promote their publications, including Cambridge University Press, the University of Chicago Press, Columbia University Press, Harvard University Press, MIT Press, and Oxford University Press. The blogs largely act as amplifiers for the press's other publications and their authors.

[11] A notable example is *The Conversation*, which was originally launched in Australia in 2011 but now includes eight separate sites covering different countries.

[12] Rohan Maitzen, 'Scholarship 2.0: Blogging and/as Academic Practice,' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 3 (2012): 348–54.

[13] Melissa Stoneham and James Kite, 'Changing the Knowledge Translation Landscape through Blogging,' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 41, no. 4 (2017): 333–34.

[14] Scott J. Brennen, Felix Simon, Philip N. Howard, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020).

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[16] There are various free-to-use licenses under which images are published, notably the licenses created by Creative Commons that allow websites to reuse an image, subject to certain conditions.

[17] Ehsan Mohammadi, Mike Thelwall, Mary Kwasny, and Kristi L. Holmes, 'Academic Information on Twitter: A User Survey,' *PLOS One* 13, no. 5 (2018): e0197265.

[18] Blogging activity is tied to the academic calendar to some extent, with substantially more posts being produced during the fall and spring terms than during the summer and winter breaks.

[19] Qing Ke, Yong-Yeol Ahn, and Cassidy R. Sugimoto, 'A Systematic Identification and Analysis of Scientists on Twitter,' *PloS ONE* 12, no. 4 (2017): e0175368.

[20] Sierra Williams and Chris Gilson, 'Sharing knowledge at a research university: experiences from the London School of Economics', in *Higher Education in the Digital Age: Moving Academia Online*, ed. Annika Zorn, Jeff Haywood, and Jean-Michel Glachant (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Press, 2018), 157-167.

[21] *British Politics and Policy at LSE* has been integrated into the LSE's Department of Government; *EUROPP – European Politics and Policy* is managed by the LSE's European Institute; *Impact of Social Sciences* and *LSE Review of Books* are located within the LSE's Communications Division; *LSE Brexit* is managed jointly by the European Institute and the School of Public Policy; and *USAPP – American Politics and Policy* is part of the LSE's United States Centre.

[22] The central landing page for the LSE blogs is: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/

[23] A notable example of this is archiving. When the LSE blogs were first established, blog editors were required to convert every article into a PDF file and send it to the university's online research depository to ensure that posts would remain accessible in the long term. This task is now performed by the university library as part of its wider archiving activities.

[24] Carlos A. Arrébola, 'How Do LSE Blogs Impact the Academic Sphere? Blogs as Citable Items in Scholarly Publications,' *Impact of Social Sciences Blog*, 13 June 2017, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/06/13/how-do-lse-blogs-impact-the-academic-sphere-blogs-as-citable-items-in-scholarly-publications/.

[25] Stuart A. Brown, 'Britain's EU Referendum: How Did Political Science Rise to the Challenge? An Assessment of Online Contributions during the Campaign,' *European Political Science* 18, no. 1 (2019): 97–111.