

Don't swap the "Ivory Tower" for a cyber one: public engagement and the internet

by Blog Admin

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*The democratising nature of blogs and social media presents opportunities for academics to communicate, but engaging from the comfort of the armchair is not enough, writes **Anthony Ridge-Newman**, who utilises blogging as a way to maximise face-to-face engagement.*



The traditional image of the academic is one that is easily caricatured with the art of visualisation. Picture a tweeded professor sat in an ivory tower surrounded by nothing but books and plumes of thought. This will ring true for some readers and for others it will be somewhat of a stereotypical pastiche. Either way, I am sure many readers will have some experience of the "Ivory Tower".

The very nature of the academic tradition means that many independent researchers lead solitary working lives. This is especially true for the social sciences and humanities. Although humans are often the subject of interest, the process of academic abstraction can leave many researchers detached from life outside the insular world of academia. The ivory tower is itself an abstract concept that illustrates how the academic mind can, more often than not, exist in a very different sphere to that of the wider public.

Public engagement that uses interactive internet technologies is becoming increasingly viewed as the answer to the problem of disconnect between academia and the public. Often, blogging, in particular, is seen as a solution. Academic perceptions are beginning to change as public engagement through social media becomes a more familiar part of everyday life.

The once fiercely guarded academic traditions and conventions are loosening to embrace new ways of disseminating ideas to all. The democratising nature of the internet has presented opportunities for academics to communicate with individuals without an Athens login. This is indeed a positive development.

However, the inherent academic disposition can be easily tempted to use blogging as an excuse to merely engage with the public from the comfort of their armchair – thus maintaining some interpersonal disconnect.

Blogging may well facilitate the opening of communication channels that would not otherwise be possible, but it should be no substitute for face-to-face interaction. Transitioning from the ivory tower to an armchair in a cyber tower does present opportunity for virtual engagement – but the virtual is no substitute for the real thing. The only way to truly engage with people is in person. If academics are to genuinely commit to the call for engagement with the public then they should use social media in order to open communication channels; develop an audience; and disseminate their work to wider audiences; but, ultimately, harness opportunities for public engagement in the offline world.

The [History Blogging Project \(HBP\)](#) is an example of a blog that was developed to facilitate face-to-face engagement, and is a response to the numerous private sector training courses in blogging. The HBP aims to provide training resources for postgraduate historians that promote blogging as a method for public engagement.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project and brainchild of Yolana Pringle, DPhil



History Student, University of Oxford is designed to encourage active participation in offline workshops, but also online by enabling historians to create, maintain and publicise a research based blog.

HBP workshops involve educational presentations, open discussions and debates. Social media and email is used to bring together the participants in an academic setting. The eclectic postgraduate historian community is also encouraged submit posts for the HBP's collaborative blog. An example of this would be the [blog post](#) that I submitted when I attended an HBP workshop earlier this year.

The HBP is a good model for using the internet to facilitate on- and offline public engagement and, with a degree of creativity, the format could be adapted for any audience.

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