

Five minutes with Conor Gearty: “It is very frustrating that my online project The Rights’ Future counts for nothing in my professional life. It is not teaching; it is not scholarly research; and it does not have impact”.

by Blog Admin

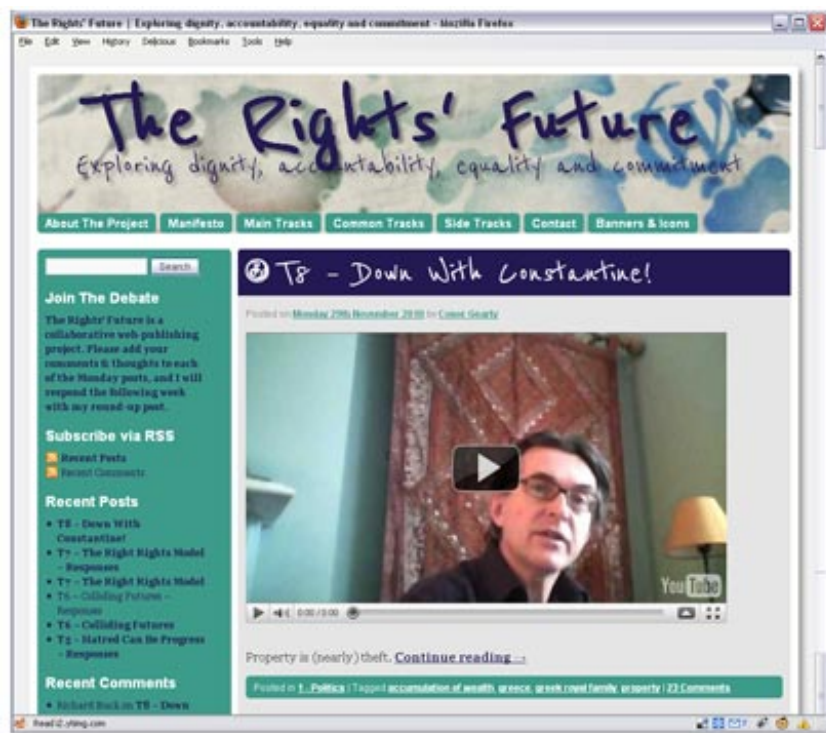
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Following the success of his collaborative online project, *The Rights’ Future*, [Conor Gearty](#) tells us how interactive blogging became his most enjoyable academic work to date and how creating his online presence has become a mountain with no summit.



You launched [The Rights’ Future](#) in 2010: a collaborative online project exploring the history, development and current success of the human rights ideal, inviting the public to engage in discussions on the blog. What was the experience like? Why were the collaborative and multimedia aspects important?

It was amazing, much the most enjoyable academic-style work that I have done. I wrote an essay every week for about six months and then got comments through the week, replying to these at the end of the week before moving on to the next essay the following week. All in all twenty such essays, so twenty replies plus various other essays (shorter – I called these Side Tracks) and longer (Common Tracks) – a lot of writing – but something like 21,000 visitors to the site from 121 countries and over 400 contributions to my weekly discussions. I was delighted with this uptake. The collaborative and multi-media aspects were not just important – they were of the essence of what I was trying to do.



What are your next plans for The Rights' Future? What sort of legacy would you like it to have?

I'd be really thrilled if The Rights' Future got taken up and used as a teaching resource in places where the language of human rights is just being developed and where – without traditional resources but with computers – teachers and students are looking for ways to get on top of the subject.

As to the future, I feel that I am slowly climbing a mountain with no summit – first (years ago) a CD on the Human Rights Act, then my website, then *The Rights Future*, then [Twitter](#), and onwards and upwards. The web always offers something new; maybe next is more interaction, an audience-based course, who knows? There is no summit because the web throws up new opportunities for further climbing just when you think you have got to the top. That is what I like about it.

Are many of your colleagues interested in academic blogging following success of The Rights' Future? Cheryl Brown wrote on the [reluctance of researchers to adopt web 2.0 tools](#) – is this something you have seen others come up against or experienced for yourself?

I am not sure. Some of my colleagues followed it and of course some are getting involved in aspects of the electronic world. But – and maybe non-academics find this hard to believe – academics do feel they are very very busy all the time, which can be true, especially if they take teaching and administrative work seriously as well as all this research we have to do in a traditional forum to prove our 'scholarly merit.' So I can understand if some people feel they don't have the time. We are a little away from breakthrough on that yet I'd say.

Danny Quah wrote that engaging young people in big academic ideas, such as economics and law, should be [just as important as the REF in the eyes of academics](#). How important do you feel that real engagement with the next generation is? In what ways can academics and universities inspire and interest young people who might not otherwise feel that university has much to offer them?

It is very frustrating that The Rights Future counts for nothing in my professional life, at least so far as the normal methods of counting are concerned. It is not teaching; it is not scholarly research; and it does not have impact. There should surely be a fourth category – enthusing the general public (I'd say young or old). This is especially true today when government is so keen to turn every department in every university into a kind of business school for a better remunerated adulthood – we can try to rectify this arid perspective – arid not only so far as university is concerned, but life itself as well.

Much debate is currently taking place on the peer review process, with Don Taylor suggesting that the [process is too slow](#) and there remains too much secrecy in it. In what ways, if any, would you like to see the peer review process change?

I think there is still space for proper peer review. I think the secrecy is good – so long as the system is rooted in trust, which in my experience it is. If it is slow then perhaps people need to be hurried up a bit when asked to review manuscripts. I am an editor of a journal and I am constantly amazed and delighted at how many colleagues help out with refereeing and how quick they are, on the whole. This system of robust scrutiny can co-exist with fiery web stuff that spills out uncontrolled, for sure – academics should do both.

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