

Blogs are increasingly recognised as a legitimate academic output, but they still remain second to traditional publications. Sarah Quinnell (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Sarah_Quinnell) asks if we should be looking for a culture of equivalence between blogs and articles, and what can be done to reach that point.



A recent re-read of an article that originally appeared in the Times Higher Education (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=410208>) has raised some interesting questions about the inclusion of blogs in PhD bibliographies. Including blogs or any form of online writing in a PhD, in my opinion, should be encouraged. This is not because I create content for a range of multi-authored blogs, or because my research looks at how academics engage with digital technology but because I believe that blogs, be they multi or singled authored offer another source of information which should be explored by researchers. As I wrote for the Guardian Higher Education Network last year blogging has a role in academic research dissemination (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2011/sep/20/academy-scared-of-blogging>). Thus, if it has a role in dissemination then it must have a role in the research we do.

I felt that the main thrust of Brabazon's article on digital media raised three important questions. The first being how can we attribute impact and academic value to blogs and digital sources, secondly how should they be referenced within a thesis and thirdly why are candidates unable to critically evaluate the authenticity of sources. A number of posts on this blog have dealt with the issue of digital impact and attribution of value. Here I will consider the second and third question; how should they be referenced and whether or not we should be looking for a culture of equivalence between blogs and peer-reviewed papers.

This got me thinking: is the writing I have published in journals any different to the blog posts I have written and if it is, why? Now obviously there are differences in writing styles and audiences, but what about quality? After much thought I feel that the difference in quality is a perceived one. I say perceived because blogs are not yet seen as authoritative, but is my writing less authoritative online than in a journal? I do not believe it is. Therefore if someone wishes to reference something I've written (that would be nice) either electronically or traditionally then there should be no difference.

If we ask students to reference blogs separately within their bibliographies I feel we would be moving into dangerous territory. The next argument would be including impact factors with journal references. This would not result in a culture of equivalence but a culture of 'all sources are equal but some are more equal than others'. This smacks of the ivory tower to say that my online writing is less authoritative than my traditional outputs.

One of the main priorities for funded research is public engagement and impact beyond the academy. The blog is better equipped for that than the journal article. The journal article will probably always be top of the tree in terms of academic quality but the blog has a different affordance. Engagement beyond the academy should be a key concern of any young research. So the fact that they are taking an interest in blogs and referring to them should be commended it means they are looking beyond the walls of their institution at how research engages with real world concerns should be commended.

If however, those same students are unable to critically evaluate their sources then we need to look at research training and supervision for PhD students. All sources should be critically evaluated irrespective of where they originate from and who wrote them. Authority of source cannot just be attributed to output method it is a combination of factors. To ignore the blog is to ignore a growing area of participatory output, but you have to evaluate its relevance and credibility as a source and be able to defend your decisions.

Yes, a thesis is an academic document designed to serve a purpose i.e. to show that the candidate is worthy of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and to do so the candidate should be aware of as much of the literature and commentary as possible, including the blog and be able to critically evaluate it. This is the

mark of a good PhD and thus a good PhD candidate, irrespective of what sources they refer to.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

Related posts:

1. The role of peer review journals cannot be replaced by Twitter, blogs, or anything else (and I really believe in blogs!) (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/01/09/twitter-slower-peer-review-traditional-publishing/>)
2. The Republic of Blogs: A new phase in the development and democratization of knowledge (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/06/12/the-republic-of-blogs/>)
3. Altmetrics, a guide to Twitter for academics, and increasing your academic footprint: our round-up of social media blogs in 2011 (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/12/28/social-media-round-up-2011/>)
4. Continual publishing across journals, blogs and social media maximises impact by increasing the size of the 'academic footprint'. (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/10/26/academic-footprint/>)
5. Five minutes with The Incidental Economist Austin Frakt: "Only 0.04% of published papers in health are reported on by the media, so blogs and other social media can help." (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/11/11/five-minutes-with-austin-frakt/>)