

Blogging platforms are not neutral: Challenging the underlying assumptions of our technology.

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As a farewell post on her last day working on the LSE Impact Blog, [Sierra Williams](#) reflects on her time as editor and her relationship with the platform. Drawing on Neil Postman's critique of technology, she looks at some of the assumptions that underpin the blog and argues a bit of 'technological modesty' is required to get a better sense of where we stand with our platforms. As we acquire new digital skills, what does this mean for the changing nature of scholarship?



Being the only staff member of a digital project like the LSE Impact Blog has invariably meant little separation in my work between the blog's success and personal success. In practice, this level of investment I have in the blog makes it difficult to just sign-off at the end of a work-day, let alone weekends and holidays. So, it is fair to say I'm struggling to come to terms with the fact that today is my last day as editor of the LSE Impact Blog. Intellectually, I know the handover processes have been well-documented, all the recording spreadsheets and shared drives have been organised (and updated!), and leaving-do drinks will shortly be consumed; but emotionally, this transition may be more difficult.

But actually this separation anxiety is not a unique position to be in and is probably very relatable for many researchers with their own projects and labours of love that inevitably reach an end. In Higher Education, where [passion is a central concept](#) for understanding academic labour, one's sense of self is intricately bound to work. But I also think there is something unique about the digital nature of this separation. My entangled relationship with the blog offers an opportunity to explore how we think about the role of technology in Higher Education. As part-farewell and part-retrospective analysis, I would like to reflect on my understanding of the digital platform and what this might mean for the blog's continued relationship to the wider academic community.



Featured Image credit: Macintosh LC II “[pizza box](#)” computer, circa 1992. Public Domain via [Wikimedia](#)

Over the years, I've come to refer to the blog as a living, sentient thing. Phrases like 'Feed the blog!', 'The blog never sleeps' and 'WordPress doesn't like that' flow freely in my head and off my tongue without much thought. These are useful metaphors to convey a dynamic platform, which perhaps also recognises the blog's reliance on a community of scholars, librarians, publishers and technologists. But, of course, computers and blogging platforms themselves are not human. They do not feel, they do not get hungry. The WordPress infrastructure in which I've invested so much of my time and energy does not actually care for me one bit. And yes, this may be a silly example of how I tend to anthropomorphise everything. But I think it is also partially reflective of how we, humans, now relate to our technology. Do I control the blog or does the blog control me?

Cultural theorist Neil Postman wrote about the metaphor of the machine as human (and the human as machine) at length in [Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology](#). In this book Postman documents the meaning we ascribe to machines and computer technologies as part of a wider trend in a society truly dominated by technology. This book was first published in 1992 when Mac computers looked like the one pictured above and Pokemon was still a card game (actually Wikipedia tells me that didn't even appear until 1996). I am sympathetic to Postman's diagnosis and critique of the powerful role of technology in our lives and his arguments certainly resonate nearly 25 years on. I say this as a strong proponent of the opportunities that technology and Web 2.0 presents in our lives, both inside and outside the academy. Postman's critique is profound for its ability to sift through the light and the darkness of technology without slipping too much into [simplistic digital dualisms](#). And his writing is clear, full of vivid metaphors and engaging stories.

So what relevance is Postman's critique for how we view digital scholarship today? The benefits of technology are widely apparent on the blog. Certainly in regards to the availability, accessibility and visibility of academic work, technological advance has done wonders. The proliferation of scientific information and expertise can develop our understanding of the world and offers a chance for people to make informed decisions about their lives. But as Jeffrey Guhin has [lucidly argued](#), a nation ruled by science alone would be a terrible idea. The danger we face is that as our culture and our scholarly spaces come to be increasingly dominated by technology's self-perpetuating rule, we are unable to see the whole picture with its implicit assumptions and frames of reference. Postman calls for a degree of "technological modesty" so we can recognise what is being lost as well as being gained.

In order to continue to challenge the underlying assumptions of our own digital infrastructure on the blog, I draw on the following fundamental questions that Postman argues are frequently left unanswered when it comes to our relationship with computers:

1. Who has put the data in?
2. For what purpose?
3. For whose convenience?
4. Based on what assumptions?

I could provide my own answers to these questions from my understanding of the blog but they could and should be asked and answered by everyone in the Impact community. And this I imagine would lead to a range of different answers. For example, what is data in this context? It could mean the html that the editor inputs, shapes and shifts according to house style, or it could equally refer to the significant body of research that goes into each blogpost that appears on the blog. Fundamentally these questions confirm that the blog is not and has never been value-free by any stretch. Editorial preference and style shape the platform, but so too do all of our assumptions about the audience of the blog, who we are trying to reach, the language we use, and the idea that blogging and research make a difference in the world.

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These questions and answers are difficult to grapple with and underpin the complexity of the blog's digital and social infrastructure. But the point here is to get to a better understanding of the blog, and digital technology more generally, for reaching our purported aims. According to Postman, "A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything." (1993; 18) So how have these technologies altered our processes? The listed purpose of the blog is to provide a place for fruitful debate and discussion about the impact of academic research. But ultimately I think our purpose aims higher. Through the discussion we facilitate, we are looking to build capacity in the research sector to actually improve the academic impact of research. Are we doing this? In what ways does technology help us achieve this? What are the costs of promoting digital skills and what skills are we losing out on in the academy by narrowing in on these new ones? How is this shaping what it means to 'do' scholarship?

I think we've done a great job of exploring these questions, but they certainly deserve continued reflection. Again, I'm not in any way warning against our use of social media or blogging (on the contrary! I'm co-authoring a book forthcoming in early 2017 titled *Communicating Your Research with Social Media: A Practical Guide*) but as we acquire new digital skills, and as our own relationships to digital platforms ebb and flow, I think we can all exhibit a bit of technological modesty to help make sense of where we stand with these digital tools and what this means for the future.

10 LSE Impact Blog posts that have particularly influenced my work:

Twitter and blogs are not add-ons to academic research, but a simple reflection of the passion underpinning it.

*The role of the academic humanist has always been a public one – however mediated through teaching and publication, argues **Tim Hitchcock**. As central means to participate in public conversations, Twitter and blogging just make good academic sense.*



What's the right model for shared scholarly communications infrastructure?

***Cameron Neylon** reflects on the differences in models and cultures of innovation in scholarly communication. For-profit startups, mission-driven non-profits, and independent academic projects all bring value to the sector individually, but there is a need for a deeper understanding of how these different models can be combined*



Social media's politics of circulation have profound implications for how academic knowledge is discovered and produced.

As social media and other new forms of media emerge as influential ways to communicate academic knowledge, **David Beer** argues academics may need to pay more attention to the politics of circulation that increasingly define how academic knowledge is discovered.



Iteration, Iteration, Iteration: Digital public archaeology and the presentation of online research

Lorna Richardson considers the impact of the many discussions she had through various online platforms on the subject of social media, archaeology and Internet technologies and their iterative effect on her work and on her methods of data collection.



It's the Neoliberalism, Stupid: Why instrumentalist arguments for Open Access, Open Data, and Open Science are not enough.

The Open Movement has made impressive strides in the past year, argues Eric Kansa, but do these strides stand for reform or are they just symptomatic of the further expansion and entrenchment of neoliberalism?



Physician, Heal Thyself: A brief manifesto on kindness in academia and the tyranny of legitimacy.

Under the rouse of rigour and seriousness, professional norms in academia often preclude kindness. **Jason Laker** looks at the issue systemically in an effort to uncover why being kind and supportive to each other is seen as surprising.



Rather than narrow our definition of impact, we should use metrics to explore richness and diversity of outcomes.

Impact is multi-dimensional, the routes by which impact occur are different across disciplines and sectors, and impact changes over time. **Jane Tinkler** argues that if institutions specify a narrow set of impact metrics, more harm than good will come of it.



The radical potential of the Digital Humanities: The most challenging computing problem is the interrogation of power

Digital humanities is a discipline that defines itself around the melding of traditional theories and new digital possibilities. **Miriam Posner** shares her keynote on the discipline's contested relationship with the social construction of data



How data does political things: The processes of encoding and decoding data are never neutral.

It is difficult to see the political structure of data, because data maintains a veneer of scientific objectivity. But data is inherently a form of politics, argues **Jeffrey Alan Johnson**.



Q+A with Bonnie Stewart: "We are part of a society and an academy where the personal/professional divide is blurring"

Bonnie Stewart provides a brief look into her research on scholarly identities and how relatively open social spaces like Twitter can be used by scholars for immersive professional development. But, she notes, this space is not without risks.



We've worked hard over the last month to ensure the handover process is as smooth as possible and I am confident that the blog will continue to grow in new, exciting directions for the scholarly community. But of course, bear with the team while this transition takes place!

Do keep in touch! I'll be at [Open Knowledge International](#), a non-profit network empowering citizens and organisations to find, use and share information, working on projects related to the impact of open data. Drop

me a line at [@sn_will](#) or sierra.williams@okfn.org.

Read Neil Postman's 1998 speech [Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change](#).

This blogpost was inspired by the Materialities of Research series on [LSE Review of Books](#). The latest one is on [waterway metaphors and humanities research](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Sierra Williams is Managing Editor of the LSE Impact blog but will soon be joining [Open Knowledge International](#) as Communications Manager. She has an MPhil in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Studies from Trinity College, Dublin and a BA in Sociology from the University of San Francisco. Sierra previously provided research and administrative support for the [LSE Impact of Social Sciences Research Project](#). Her interests are in open scholarship (including using social media across the research lifecycle), evidence-based action, distributed networks of communication, and data sharing. She tweets [@sn_will](#).

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