

Academic blogging is part of a complex online academic attention economy, leading to unprecedented readership.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/12/12/academic-attention-economy/

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Given the far-reaching attention of their paper on the nature of academic blogging, [Inger Mewburn](#) and [Pat Thomson](#) find blogging is now part of a complex online 'attention economy' where social media can help your work travel further. But in this new world awash with academic papers, the signal to noise ratio is low. Will the highest quality papers be read most? Or will it be only those backed by the loudest voices?



As academics with a reputation for being successful bloggers, we often get asked with an air of doubt and trepidation: "Should I blog?" Many of our colleagues seem worried that blogging and being active on social media is yet another addition to their already heavy work regime. It's an understandable fear, given that blogging is not readily countable in conventional academic performance metrics. But does blogging really have no place in conventional understandings of journal impact factors and citation rates?



In a small-scale study of 100 blogs, which we recently published in *Studies in Higher Education*, we tried to find out what academics were blogging about, the nature of the 'voice' they employed in their posts and who they were writing for. We concluded that blogging is a diverse activity which is more 'relaxed' than the writing which appears in journals, but that there is a lot more formal writing being done for blogs than we might expect.

While arguments are made for blogging as an outreach activity, where academics 'translate' their work for a non-academic audience, in our sample we saw more evidence of conversations happening between academics – and much of it about academia itself. This led us to conclude that the blogging discourse, is similar in purpose, if not necessarily in form or content, to the academic discourse happening in journals: academics talking to academics in an effort to advance knowledge and understanding.

You can [read the paper "Why do academics blog? An analysis of audiences, purposes and challenges \(now behind paywall\)"](#) if you are interested in our findings – this post is concerned with what happened next, in particular the circulation of our paper through what we might call 'the academic attention economy'.

On this blog, last year, [Melissa Terras reported on her project](#) to make the articles she had deposited in her institutional repository more visible on social media. Her strategy was a clever one. Similar to a movie studio releasing the 'making of' to stimulate interest in a film, Terras wrote a series of 'back story' blog posts which highlighted some of the "[stuff that doesn't make it into the official write up](#)" as a way to encourage her audience over to her other writing practice. Terras tweeted the blog posts and measured the response.

In the post she shows an interesting graph demonstrating the effects of tweeting on the article downloads. The graphs clearly show that social media activity increased the rate of downloads some ten times over. Terras concluded from this that:

| *If (social media interaction is often) then (Open access + social media = increased downloads).*

We expected our social media profiles to affect downloads of our article, but even we were surprised with what happened next.

Why do academics blog? An analysis of audiences, purposes and challenges

Inger Mewburn & Pat Thomson
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Marketing time: evolving timescapes in academia

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As this post is being written, the Taylor and Francis count shows that our “Why do academics blog?” paper has been viewed 1914 times in the seven weeks since it was published (we should point out that this is about seven times less than one of our blogs attracts on a normal weekday). The ‘article views’ count enables us to compare our views with others in the issue and from this we can tell our paper has approximately ten times more views than the next most popular paper and 19 times more views than the least popular one. But what surprised us most of all is that we made it into the top twenty most viewed papers of all time – currently standing at the 10th most viewed paper on Studies in Higher Education, and we are the only one to do so without any citations yet recorded.

We took relatively few steps ourselves to publicise the paper compared to Terras, but we did have more help from the main-stream media in the circulation of our paper. The link to 50 ‘free view’ copies, which each of us were sent via email, was tweeted once by each of us and placed on the Facebook page connected to one of our blogs. These free copies were rapidly downloaded and people started requesting the article via Twitter and social media. Noting the interest, [Taylor and Francis themselves issued a press release about it](#) and (thankfully) made it gold open access. An article appeared on the ‘[Third Degree](#)’ blog attached to the Australian newspaper ‘The Age’. Third Degree highlighted some of the more controversial aspects of the findings, which generated yet more hits on the article database.

As news of the paper leaked out via mainstream media, [other bloggers started to write reflections on the piece](#), which made the original article more discoverable in Google. We are however now in the interesting position of getting more interest from mainstream media in this work than from those on social media. We were asked to write a piece for [The Guardian](#) and niche publishers like ‘Euroscience’ and ‘Physics today’, have requested articles or commentary on the paper. Interestingly all of these publications cater for higher education readers and saw our research as of interest to that particular audience. This is of course congruent with our actual findings!

We will be keeping an eye on the citations as they emerge – these will provide yet another data point for us to consider in our work. But in our minds the answer to the question “Should I blog?” is now a clear and resounding

“Yes”, at least, if conventional indicators of academic success are your aim. Blogging is now part of a complex online ‘attention economy’ where social media like Twitter and Facebook are not merely dumb ‘echo chambers’ but a massive global conversation which can help your work travel much further than you might initially think.

But all this reverberation made us wonder: in the future, what will be the fate of academics who don’t make the time to blog or tweet?

In the month it took us to finish this article, with the vagaries of two busy academic work schedules and an ocean or two between us, our paper had progressed from 19th to 13th, to 10th most read article on SHE. Far higher than many papers we ourselves consider seminal works in the literature on higher education. On the morning Inger made the last edits on this post, [Peter Higgs, of Higgs-Boson particle fame, pointed out that he would no longer be employable as an academic](#) because he would not be considered ‘productive’ enough. His point was well made: the pressure on academics to publish is extreme and they are responding, with a truly astounding amount of work. But in this new online world, awash with academic papers, the [signal to noise ratio](#) is low.

Just like a taller, more powerful radio tower will boost a signal so it can be heard at a greater distance; it makes sense that more people will read a paper if the writer is active on social media. Of course, because we wrote it, we think it’s great that our paper has proved so popular, but we have to ask: in the future, will the highest quality papers be read most? Or will it be only those papers backed up by the loudest voices?

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science 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 Authors

Inger Mewburn is the Director of Research Training at The Australian National University where she is responsible for co-ordinating, communicating and measuring all the centrally run research training activities and doing research on student experience to inform practice. She writes and edits [The Thesis Whisperer](#) blog.

Pat Thomson is Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. Her current research focuses on creativity, the arts and change in schools and communities, and postgraduate writing pedagogies. She is currently devoting more time to exploring, reading and thinking about imaginative and inclusive pedagogies which sit at the heart of change. She blogs about her research at [Patter](#).

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