



LJMU Research Online

Matthews-Jones, LM

Blogging the Victorians for the Journal of Victorian Culture Online

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/2398/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Matthews-Jones, LM (2016) Blogging the Victorians for the Journal of Victorian Culture Online. Journal of Victorian Culture, 1 (22). pp. 102-111. ISSN 1750-0133

LJMU has developed [LJMU Research Online](#) for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

Bloggging the Victorians for the *Journal of Victorian Culture Online*

Lucinda Matthews-Jones

Journal of Victorian Culture (JVC) Online was established in 2009 as an interactive companion to the *Journal of Victorian Culture (JVC)*. It is an innovative departure from static academic journal websites. An open access multi-authored academic blog and social media presence, *JVC Online* is attached to *JVC*, but acts independently of it and can extend beyond the Journal's parameters. Going beyond the traditional web activities of academic journals, it demonstrates the new directions which academic publishing can take in the digital age. Much of the current discussion about academic publishing privileges the question of open access in relation to traditional publishing methods. This is not surprising given the fast pace with which the Finch Report has been implemented in the UK.¹ However, the preoccupation with open access should not cause us to overlook the myriad ways in which the web and social media are being used, and could be used, for greater research engagement and community building by academic journals. Indeed, Jane Winter has praised *JVC Online* as 'a separate online supplement' to *JVC* which 'very effectively builds community around the publication and presents a rich and diverse range of material' and adding that, 'The journal is quite deliberately reaching beyond its core academic audience to a wider public online.'² This article considers how *JVC Online* has reconceived academic publishing for the digital age by contextualising the current website and its associated activities and by discussing possible future developments. In doing so, it questions the narrative that traditional non-open access

¹ For a discussion of Open Access see our 'Open Access' Digital Forum, featuring contributions by James Mussell, Martin Paul Eve, Peter Mandler, Melodee Beals and James Emmott: *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18:4 (2013), pp. 526-57.

² Jane Winters, 'Practicing History in Public: Communicating Research in the 21st Century', *Workshop on Transatlantic Historical Approaches* (29 May 2013). I am grateful to Jane Winters for sharing this paper with me. More information on this conference can be found at <<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/worldwide/partners/partners/unc/newsandevents/events/TransatlanticHistoricalApproaches.aspx>> [accessed 13 September 2013].

academic journals are, to use the words of Jo Guldi, a ‘relic of another age’ that have played no role in thinking about or transforming the ways in which readers engage with scholarship.³

JVC Online was unveiled in early September 2010 at the annual conference of the British Association of Victorian Studies. *JVC Online* has steadily raised its profile since then. Last year the site had just over 71,000 page views. It is hosted by the blogging service Wordpress and is hosted on the Taylor and Francis servers. It provides a platform to researchers in Victorian studies who wish to disseminate their research and broader interests to a wider readership and in formats other than those which dominate traditional academic publishing. It joins a range of recently-established blogs and digital spaces dedicated to Victorian studies whose aim is to build an identity and voice for those who, at an institutional and professional level, might feel voiceless. The democratic tenets of Web 2.0 mean that everyone has at their disposal the means to disseminate their intellectual labour more quickly than has ever been the case. *JVC Online* taps into this trend. It provides both bloggers and non-bloggers an opportunity to share their work and ideas before or alongside the standard publishing routes. For researchers who do not wish to have a blog of their own, it provides access to a site they do not have to maintain. Bloggers can use *JVC Online*'s platform, with its popular Twitter and Facebook streams, to build engagement with their own blogs.

Multi-Author Blogging

According to Julia Martin and Brian Hughes, academic blogging should be understood as a form of ‘small *p* publishing’ which enables ‘scholars and researchers a more accessible avenue of discourse than peer-reviewed journals’. Blogs ‘are easy to contribute to,

³ Jo Guldi, ‘Reinventing the Academic Journal’, in *Hacking the Academy*, ed. by Dan Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), pp. 19-24 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12172434.0001.001/1:2/--hacking-the-academy-new-approaches-to-scholarship?g=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1#2.3>> [accessed 24 August 2015].

and allow for creativity of both writing style and multimedia elements'.⁴ Many academic blogs are personal blogs maintained by one scholar which act as a means of disseminating that scholar's individual research to a wider audience.⁵ These bloggers are cultivating an academic identity in the digital sphere. As Rory Ewins notes, academic blogging is 'not simply about what it means to be labelled a 'blogger', but about the role of one's track record and accumulated posting history in creating a sense of personal identity'.⁶ But not all academic blogs are single-authored. Some blogs can be research theme led and run by a collective of academics, or in some cases a teaching blog that is led by a tutor with students playing an important role in its development and content.⁷ The open access debates have highlighted how much 'trust' academic journals have in specific fields, and this is something

⁴ Julia Martin and Brian Hughes, 'Small *p* Publishing: A Networked Blogging Approach to Academic Discourse', *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship*, 24:1 (2012), pp. 17-21 (p. 17).

⁵ Examples of academic blogs in Victorian Studies include: Vicky Holmes, *Victorian Domestic Dangers* <<http://victoriandomesticdangers.com/>>; Lesley Hulonce, *Workhouse Tales* <<https://lesleyhulonce.wordpress.com/>>; Charlotte Mathieson, *Dr Charlotte Mathieson* <<https://charlottemathieson.wordpress.com/>>; Bob Nicholson, *Digital Victorianist* <<http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/>>; Helen Rogers, *Convictions: Stories from a Nineteenth Century Prison* <<http://convictionblog.com/>>; Serena Trowbridge, *Culture and Anarchy* <<https://cultureandanarchy.wordpress.com/>>; Guy Woolnough, *Victorian Policing* <<http://www.guywoolnough.com/>> [all accessed 16 October 2015].

⁶ Rory Ewins, 'Who are you? Weblogs and Academic Identity', *E-Learning*, 2:4 (2005), pp. 368-77 (p. 368). See also Amber Regis, 'Early Career Victorianists and Social Media: Impact, Audience and Online Identities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17:3 (2012), pp. 355-62 (p. 356).

⁷ Examples of multi-authored academic blogs include *The Floating Academy* <<http://floatingacademy.wordpress.com/about/>> and the BAVS postgraduate blog <<https://victorianist.wordpress.com/>> [both accessed 24 August 2015]. For examples of student-led teaching blogs see Helen Roger's Liverpool John Moores University student blogs *Writing Lives* <<http://www.writinglives.org/>> and *Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession, c. 1700-1900* <<http://www.prisonvoices.org/>> [both accessed 11 October 2015]. See also David Turner, 'Researching and Re-telling the Past: Blogging about Disability History', *Blogging Beyond the Classroom* (16 December 2014) <<http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=626>>; Paul Ward, 'Digital Victorians', *Blogging Beyond the Classroom* (12 February 2015) <<http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=664>> Zoe Alker, 'The Digital Classroom: New Social Media and Teaching Victorian Crime', *Law, Crime and History* 5:1 (2015), pp. 77-92 <<http://www.pbs.plymouth.ac.uk/solon/hjournal2015Vo5p1.html>> [all accessed 11 October 2015].

that can usefully be drawn upon in the development of new academic digital spaces such as *JVC Online*. Multi-authored blogs provide a natural hub for the creation of scholarly community, engagement and identity.

JVC Online blog posts tend to be around 1500 words, although shorter and longer posts are accepted. It asks authors to write posts intended for an informed audience, including academics, but also those who have an interest in Victorian culture and are not a part of the academy such as independent scholars, local historians or the general public more broadly. It is thus intended to widen the reach of *JVC* and promote Victorian studies as scholarly, interdisciplinary subject area. Unlike *JVC*, we invite scholars and non-scholars to write blog posts can be written at various stages of a research project, elaborate on areas that do not fit into articles, or provide in-depth analysis of particular sources. Direct content from the journal comes in the form of article posts. These posts are used to disseminate research and are used to provide snapshots of what we have published in the journal. They are not supposed to reproduce an article's abstract, but can offer an introduction to an article's argument or theme. Like a research post, article authors could reflect on their methodology.

JVC Online's first posts were written by *JVC* Editor Helen Rogers along with Lisa Hager (*JVC Online* Editor between 2010 and 2013) to advertise content in the print journal. *JVC Online* was also set up to provide a platform for an online-only section 'Victorians beyond the Academy'. Short summaries of forthcoming articles were the main content along with notices about nineteenth century-themed exhibitions such as 'The Romantics at the Tate' and another Tate exhibition, 'Eadweard Muybridge'.⁸ While academic journals can include photographs and hyperlinks in footnotes, blogs provide more interactive functions. Since

⁸ See Helen Rogers, 'Eadweard Muybridge at Tate Britain', *JVC Online* (15 September 2010) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2010/09/15/eadweard-muybridge-at-tate-britain/>> and 'Romantics at Tate Britain', *JVC Online* (2 September 2010) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2010/09/02/romantics-at-tate-britain/>> [both accessed 24 August 2015].

2011, there has been a strong drive to increase the content of the ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ section of the site. It is the only part of the blog that is formally listed on *JVC*’s Taylor and Francis’s journal site.⁹ ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ was created for two reasons. Firstly, it was intended to highlight the place of the Victorians within popular culture and to open up conversations between academics and non-academics. Secondly, it was intended to provide a timely way of enabling exhibition, TV and film reviews to be published. Up until now this has probably been the strongest component of *JVC Online* which explains the increasing frequency of posts in this section. On the basis of the success of this section of the site and of this section in particular, two new editors were appointed by a blogging competition to help with the management of *JVC Online*, myself and Ryan Fong. Despite its success, it should be noted that this part of the site, does not formally sit with the journal. Work published under the ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ is not subsequently listed with the content of the journal, which can suggest, for me, an implied hierarchy of publishing, especially when content articles published in the journal might have been placed in the ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ section.

This in turn raises interesting questions about whether the *Journal of Victorian* brand has always been successful in bringing the journal and the site together. There are moments when the site has worked quite independently of the journal and vice versa. I am keen to think more about how we solidify our relationship. On the one hand, it has been difficult to get authors to write short posts for their articles. As a new editorial team we have thought more about how we solicit these pieces. On the other hand, we might have to consider how content from *JVC Online* could inform future content of the journal to show that our relationship is informed, reciprocal relationship with one another. After all, *JVC Online*

⁹ ‘Aim and Scope’, Taylor and Francis Online, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rjvc20#.VIIX2Svdbzg>> [accessed 22 November 2015].

offers the journal with a way in which to conceive of our journal's brand identity. James Mussell's contribution to this Digital Forum invites scholars to 'experiment' and reconceive what makes a journal. We already have a digital platform that invites scholars to use multimedia and visual material. These aspirations should be extended to the journal, who in turn can invite less traditionally conceived articles that would benefit from not being tied to the static PDF.

Generating content for blogs such as *JVC Online* can be difficult. It involves an active curation of the site. To overcome this we initially ran several showcases on blogging and teaching. We also tapped into our networks by inviting colleagues, friends and peers to write posts for the site through face-to-face interactions, email, Victoria-listserv and on Twitter. This sustained content drive witnessed a growth in posts and readership. But, our determination to drive content can be time-consuming. When I became Managing Editor of the site (and gained a seat on the *JVC* Editorial board) I decided that the site needed a team of bloggers. Since the beginning of 2013, *JVC Online* has been bolstered by the introduction of regular contributors, a team of bloggers who are asked to contribute regular posts to the site. The team has recently been joined by Joanne Parsons who now coordinates *JVC Online* social media accounts. Many of *JVC Online*'s contributors are postgraduate or early career researchers. This is perhaps not surprising. Blogging has been promoted to people at this specific career stage as a way of building a scholarly profile, and workshops and conference panels have recently explored how social media and blogging can help new academics to forge a career.¹⁰ According to Melissa Gregg, blogging has become 'a major part of the

¹⁰ See, for instance, Naomi Lloyd, 'The Historian's Toolkit: Social Media and Social Networking', *JVC Online* (12 June 2013), <http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2013/06/12/the-historians-toolkit-social-media-and-social-networking/>, [accessed 22 November 2015]; Lucinda Matthews-Jones, 'A Blog on Blogging: Reflecting on the 'Transforming Objects' Roundtable', *JVC Online* (1st June 2012), < <http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2012/06/01/a-blog-on-blogging-reflecting-on-the-transforming-objects-roundtable/>> [accessed 22 November 2015].

experience of *becoming professional* for junior academics'.¹¹ Scholars are able to create a public identity earlier in their career that is not dependent on publications or attending expensive subject conferences.

Building Networked Audiences

JVC Online is more than a blog. It is also a public interface between the journal and its readers. One of my aims as *JVC Online* Editor has been to explore how academic journals might use digital tools to engage with their readers. The introduction of altmetrics by publishers, like Taylor and Francis, which show how many times an article has been viewed and shared through Twitter, demonstrate the significant role digital tools will play in traditional publishing. Another important reason for investing in new ways of communicating with readers is the open access revolution. It cannot be assumed that academic journals will abandon commercial publishing in the light of open access requirements. Many journals are still under contract with their publishers. For other journals, publishing commercially is a business model that provides much needed income to scholarly societies and organisations. One key question is: how are commercial journals going to make sure that those articles published under the green route are not overlooked? The likely hybrid nature of open access publishing will mean that some articles are published straight away (through the so-called gold route) while others are published under an embargo through university repositories (the green route).¹² The life cycle of 'green' articles will transform the journal issue, not only for *JVC*, but also all journals, by creating an additional stage after publication.

The short posts which *JVC Online* asks authors to write to accompany their forthcoming articles in *JVC* will have an increasingly important role in how *JVC* advertises

¹¹ Melissa Gregg, 'Banal Bohemia: Blogging from the Ivory Tower Hot-Desk', *Convergence*, 15 (2009), pp. 470-83 (p. 470).

¹² For a discussion of 'Gold' and 'Green' Open Access see James Emmott, 'On Academic Integrity and the Right to Copy', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18:4 (2013), pp.530-1.

articles published under the green route. For authors, these accompanying posts will be an opportunity to direct readers to open access versions held by university repositories once they are out of the embargo period by including a hyperlink. We will then be able to circulate them again through the site and social media. This will change the relationship that journals like *JVC* have with their back catalogue. Through its online platform, *JVC* and *JVC Online* will be able to extend the life-cycle of an article by promoting it on social media and re-packaging it through the blog. Similarly, Helen Roger's accompanying article in this Digital Forum argues, *JVC Online* will also be able to curate older pieces through themed special issues. The aim here is to merge traditional and digital publishing to meet the needs of the open access age.

But beyond the demands of adapting to open access, *JVC Online* is committed to encouraging new dialogues around scholarship.¹³ Readers are able to comment on blog posts or pingback to our posts from their own blogs. This is reinforced by the use of social media/networking devices Twitter and Facebook. Between 2009 and 2015 *JVC Online* had 350 comments from readers leaving their reflections, and authors replying to these reflections. An example of this is Merrick Burrow's blog, related to his *JVC* article, 'The Imperial Souvenir: Things and Masculinities in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines & Allan Quatermain*'.¹⁴ Burrow's post received blog comments from his colleague, Paul Ward, and from Bradley Deane, whose work he engages with in his article. For Burrow, receiving comments was 'one of the most valuable things about the feature comments, since journal articles tend not to get reviewed (other than if it gets picked up in a 'year's work in X' survey

¹³ Regis, 'Early career Victorianists', pp. 355-56.

¹⁴ Merrick Burrow, 'The Imperial Souvenir: Things and Masculinities in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines & Allan Quatermain*', *JVC Online* (29 November 2012) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2012/11/29/burrow-imperial-souvenir/>> [accessed 24 August 2015].

article).¹⁵ The exchange between Burrow and Bradley Deane is especially interesting because it enabled networking and scholarly overlaps to be acknowledged.¹⁶

Another important example of a post that attracted reader engagement was Greg Jenner's post on Michael Gove's plans to revise History provision in the National Curriculum in England and Wales.¹⁷ Under Gove's initial plans, History was to be taught chronologically with an emphasis on the British national story. Jenner's post received 15 detailed comments from school teachers. We encouraged this kind of reader engagement by placing a tagline at the beginning of the post. It was also widely tweeted by *JVC Online* and by Jenner himself. It was subsequently retweeted extensively, reaching 2720 readers.¹⁸ Despite directing readers to comment on how the nineteenth century was taught in schools, few comments really discussed how the curriculum changes would impact this specific area. Instead comments were largely driven to consider the 'dry and dull' nature of the curriculum or the dangers of such a chronically intensive KS2 and KS3. *JVC Online* therefore provided a space for teachers to voice their frustration and concerns about Gove's proposed changes. Yet we had hoped that this would also provide a bridge for university lecturers and school teachers to reflect on the curriculum together. No university academic intervened or joined in the conversation, suggesting that educational concerns are usually tied to the everyday realities of specific jobs.

Yet Burrow's and Jenner's two posts are the exception rather than the rule. The vast majority of *JVC Online* posts tend not to receive detailed comments or if they do, they can be

¹⁵ Email exchange between Lucinda Matthews-Jones and Merrick Burrows [12 December 2013].

¹⁶ Email exchange between Lucinda Matthews-Jones and Merrick Burrow [12 December 2013].

¹⁷ Greg Jenner, 'Why too much History is Bad History: The Proposed History Curriculum', *JVC Online* (22nd February 201) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2013/02/22/why-too-much-history-is-bad-history-the-proposed-history-curriculum/>> [accessed 24 August 2015].

¹⁸ Site Analytics for *JVC Online*.

described, using the words of Gill Kirkup, as ‘verbal equivalents of applause’.¹⁹ This suggests that, as spaces of scholarly communication, blogs can be one dimensional. Comments are usually simply along the lines of ‘Great post – fascinating’²⁰, and ‘Very interesting article, beautifully illustrated, thank you!’²¹ In one sense, one might feel disappointment that blogging does not seem to provoke fuller dialogue. More optimistically, however, these exchanges demonstrate the potential of blogging to introduce readers to new ideas and sources more quickly than can be achieved with traditional academic publishing. Blogs might not always prompt in depth academic debate, but they do have an important role in developing scholarly community and idea-sharing, reaching across national and disciplinary boundaries. Nonetheless, if journal sites, like *JVC Online*, want to improve scholarly engagement they might have to lead from the front and ask members of the editorial board to engage regularly with the digital platform that support their traditional outputs.

According to Alexander Halarais, an important hallmark of a blog is the ability of readers to comment on posts and strike up a conversation with the blogger. She notes that blogs without comments cannot be regarded as having ‘A’ list status. The lack of sustained comments might be taken to imply that *JVC Online* lacks this status. Yet the blog itself is not the only place where interaction takes place. As a brand *JVC Online* can draw on its social media applications for inviting scholarly engagement. Twitter, in particular, provides an alternative space for dialogue between authors and readers and *JVC Online* puts significant energy into maintaining its social media presences in order to facilitate and promote these

¹⁹ Gill Kirkup, ‘Academic Blogging: Academic Practice and Academic Identity’, *London Review of Education*, 8:1 (2010), pp. 75-84 (p. 82).

²⁰ Serena Trowbridge, ‘Living the Nineteenth Century’, *JVC Online* (25 March 2013) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2013/03/25/living-the-nineteenth-century/>> [accessed 24 August 2015].

²¹ Alice Crossley, ‘Victorian Valentines from Sentiment to Satire’, *JVC Online* (14 February 2013) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2013/02/11/victorian-valentines-from-sentiment-to-satire/>> [accessed 24 August 2015].

kinds of dialogues.²² Guy Woodnough's *JVC Online* post on 'Identifying the Victorian Middle Classes' did not receive a comment on the blog itself.²³ Yet it sparked an intense and interesting discussion on Twitter about how scholars should deal with the Victorian middle classes. The success of *JVC Online*, I would argue, rests on the role of social media in creating, what Alexander Halarais has termed, 'networked audiences'.²⁴ Networking tools once thought to be places to socialise are now spaces in which to construct a professional identity. *JVC Online* has now been joined by a number of Victorian studies Twitter accounts. This includes *Romantic Textualities* (@RomText), *Royal Society for Victorian Periodicals* (@VPReditors2013; @RS4VP), *Victorian Review* (@VictorianReview) and *Victorian Studies* (@VictStudies). *JVC Online* also has a Facebook page which normally receives around 2-20 'Likes' per post. But, we need to acknowledge that developing sustained social media engagement is time consuming for academics maintaining.

An obvious benefit of having both a Twitter and Facebook account is that it enables *JVC Online* to interact with a diverse audience with relative ease. A survey conducted in 2013 illustrated that 66% of readers follow us on social media. Broken down, 39% of survey respondents follow *JVC Online* on Twitter only, 8% on Facebook only, and 22% on both social media platforms. Interaction on both Twitter and Facebook has steadily increased since February 2012. Our Twitter account now has 3295 followers, while our Facebook page has been liked by 2475 people.²⁵ Although they share some similarities as social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook enable *JVC Online* to interact with followers in different

²² See Bob Nicholson, 'Tweeting the Victorians', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48:2 (2015), pp. 254-60.

²³ Guy Woolnough, 'Identifying the Victorian Middle Class', *JVC Online* (23 September 2013) <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2013/09/23/identifying-the-victorian-middle-class/>> [accessed 16 October 2015].

²⁴ Alexander Halarais, 'Scholarly Blogging: Moving towards the Visible College' in *Uses of Blogs*, ed. by Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs (New York; Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 118-126 (p. 118).

²⁵ Figures corrects as of 11 November 2015.

ways. By allowing retweeting, Twitter enables users to advertise, share and take ownership of posts beyond a specific Twitter feed.²⁶ While many of these features are available on Facebook (sharing a post and commenting), it is interesting that they are not fully used by our readers. Facebook tends to be used to direct readers to posts but does not seem to encourage them to share or comment on posts. This might indicate that many users see Facebook as a more personal and private sphere than Twitter.

Despite two-thirds of our 2013 survey respondents using social media, it should be noted that a third do not follow *JVC Online* on either Facebook or Twitter. Nor should it be assumed that all *JVC Online* readers are regular users connected to the site's social media updates. While over half of our survey respondents read the blog monthly, only 10% visited every few days, with the vast majority visiting a few times a month or once a month and a significant percentage of readers only visit the site occasionally. Beyond social media, these readers were more likely to use the tagging, search box and calendar functions on the *JVC Online* site. The top of the *JVC Online* page now includes a number of additional sections including 'Events and Calls for Papers', 'Resources' and a 'Link and Resources' section for wider community information, while 'Victorians beyond the Academy', 'Victorians on Display' and 'Virtual Victorians' host research posts including article posts; TV, film theatre, and exhibition reviews; and digital sources. For readers who drop into the site, this creates a better reading experience as it enables them to pinpoint the sections of the site they wish to engage with.

Digital spaces are also increasingly seen as an important way for academics to engage with the general public. Blogs and social media such as Twitter and Facebook have opened our research to larger and more diverse audiences. *JVC Online* taps into the shift toward greater public engagement in UK higher education. REF2014, the latest research quality

²⁶ For a discussion of retweeting in Victorian Studies, see Nicholson, 'Tweeting the Victorians', pp. 257-59.

assessment undertaken in the UK, pushed academics to think about the ‘reach and significance’ of their research beyond the academic sphere.²⁷ The effect has been to see more people approach me, as Editor, to write posts, especially around the time of REF2014. A shift in this direction has also evolved more naturally in the Victorian Studies community through the development of public history research and though a strand of Neo-Victorian studies which explores heritage, community engagement and the representation and presentation of the Victorians in the public sphere.

We have been committed to providing scholars with a space in which to write light-hearted pieces as well as scholarly ones. This has largely been welcomed by followers, as one respondent to our survey declared ‘I think it’s great! The content —especially the mix of ‘fun’ pieces on Victoriana and more serious pieces on Victorian culture and the field we work in— is excellent.’ Some activities such as the ‘Great Victorian Bake Off’ have divided opinion. One respondent commented that the ‘Bake Off’ feature created a ‘lighter’ aura (‘I like the fun ingredients: so many academic resources are po-faced’), but another noted that they were ‘Not sure that posts such as the Victorian bake-off are appropriate for even the online face of a scholarly journal.’ Whether or not academic readers approve of the ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ posts, there is clear evidence that these have been successful in bringing about ‘knowledge exchange’, to use the language often deployed in UK universities. Following the ‘Bake Off’ posts, I was called by the BBC TV show ‘The Great British Bake Off’ to consult on an historical feature for one of their episodes. This year saw them have an episode dedicated to Victorian baking. Diverging opinions, nevertheless, reflect the fact that for some in the Victorian studies community food history is not an academically weighty subject. It also highlights differing perceptions of what makes an academic brand at a time when there is

²⁷ See ‘Assessment Criteria and Level Definitions’, *REF 2014* (12 December 2014) <<http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/assessmentcriteriaandleveldefinitions/>> [accessed 1 January 2014]

growing unease on the value of the humanities especially in the USA. The result has been to see blogs like the *V21 Collective* created to generate discussion around methodological and conceptual issues.²⁸

The relative strength of the ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ section of *JVC Online* vis-à-vis the other sections is also, in part, a matter of practicality, since it has been much easier to commission pieces for this section than it has been to solicit research-focussed posts. On the one hand, the readiness of scholars to write for ‘Victorians beyond the Academy’ points to the growth of interest in Neo-Victorian studies and in public engagement, but on the other, it reveals – perhaps - the discomposure some academics feel with disseminating their research prior to full publication. *JVC Online* seeks to ‘meet the research needs’ of the scholarly community, but, beyond the willing early career scholars previously discussed, research blogs from more established scholars are difficult to come by. We need to be careful here. New digital spaces have the potential to create academic roles which perpetuate academic hierarchies.²⁹ As I have already argued above blogging has far reaching potentials for early-career academics, which can be extended to more senior scholars. Blogging can enable us to sustain a public, networked identity as we develop new research projects as well as enabling us to disseminate older unpublished research.³⁰ Of course, this is compounded by the fact that academic communities and university institutions are still not sure how to value digital work. Blogging has been a controversial form of academic publishing. As Lisa Hager notes, ‘few [American university] departments see this work as critical to achieving tenure or

²⁸ *V21 Collective* <<http://v21collective.org/>> [accessed 11 October 2015].

²⁹ Nadine Muller, ‘Academia & Social Media: Practices, Politics, Problems’, *Nadine Muller* (13 December 2013) <<http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/musings/academia-and-social-media/>> [accessed 07 February 2014].

³⁰ An excellent model for this is Joanne Begiato’s blog *Joanne Begiato Muses on History*, <<https://jbailey2013.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 22 November 2015].

being promoted'.³¹ This is mirrored in UK Higher Education, which overwhelmingly privileges traditional publication outputs at the expense of digital forms such as large datasets. This has led Syndi Dunn to argue that digitally-minded scholars tend to 'do double the work'.³² But, sharing work continuously and more widely through digital platforms, like *JVC Online*, should become an important part of our academic identity.

Let me end by taking this opportunity, therefore, to encourage *all* of our *Journal of Victorian Culture* readers to contribute research posts to *JVC Online*. We would like to use the blog to give readers the space to reflect on the Journal's 'Roundtables' and 'New Agendas' sections. We are also keen for readers to reflect on key books that have informed their research. We would like readers to see *JVC Online* as a vibrant scholarly space where they can write research posts that discuss methodological/theoretical issues, sources and research questions. Blogging is a practice that enables scholars to create ownership of their work beyond traditional publishing, while also providing them with global networks.³³ Yet blogging is not just a global act. It also has the potential to reach a local or national audience that you might not usually have the chance to tap into. Academic departments are usually constrained by the everyday realities of teaching and admin. It is rare that you will find academics of the same specific research area at your own institution. Disseminating research digitally also enables you to speak to academics in a global common room. We are excited by new developments being undertaken by the site. We hope that you will join us on our blogging journey.

³¹ Lisa Hager, 'Towards a Public humanities: Academic Blogging and the Journal of Victorian Culture Online', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18:2 (2013), pp. 273-79.

³² Syndi Dunn, 'Digital Humanities: If you Want Tenure, Do Double the Work', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (5 January 2014) <<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/249-digital-humanists-if-you-want-tenure-do-double-the-work>> [accessed on 07 February 2014].

³³ Pat Thompson and Inger Mewburn, 'Why do Academics Blog?: An Analysis of Audiences, Purposes and Challenges', *Studies in Higher Education*, 38: 8 (2013), pp. 1105-19.

