

## HOW TO BLOG ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH

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For the past decade, public engagement, impact, and the dissemination of research beyond the academy have been making regular appearances in the key responsibilities and essential criteria for academic job advertisements as well as playing a major part in the assessment and funding of scholarship. In this context, your chief reason for considering a research blog might well be that you feel you should, or even must. What was, not all that long ago, a novel activity pursued by a select few cutting-edge academics and the most eager of the next generation of early-career scholars has now become common place for individuals and research teams alike. The virtual world is awash with blogs detailing the findings of completed projects, or news of the latest research, events, enticing soundbites, and creative content connecting researchers and engaging non-academic publics in the creation of new knowledge. But the internet is also littered with the abandoned ruins of academic webpages by researchers old and new. These online artefacts chronicle a still common story that frequently begins with an enthusiasm (sometimes cautious, sometimes uncurbed) for communicating exciting new ideas to a world waiting with bated breath and eternal gratefulness, but which frequently ends with a lack of time and motivation to continue the overambitious pursuit of the digital domination of a discipline in the face of disappointed hopes and dreams about what a blog should achieve.

Whether you cannot wait to click “publish” on your first ever post, or you are apprehensive, even resistant, to writing about your research online, this guide helps you to determine clear, positive reasons for blogging, identify your audiences, consider their needs and preferences, and think through the ethical implications of research blogging. Giving your blog a purpose and creating a clear strategy for its content and maintenance are key to maintaining your motivation, making it an effective space for both you and your readers, and ensuring it is a manageable and productive part of your workload.

## **Reasons to blog your research**

As academic and well-established blogging expert Pat Thomson (2020) points out, “the first issue with a blog of your own relates to the primary question of why” (2020, n. pag.). Identifying your reasons for wanting to blog about your research will help you identify your audiences and, thus, create a blog whose format and content are strategic and effective, taking into account the needs and preferences of the audiences you want to engage. Below is a (by no means exhaustive) list of reasons you may want to write about your research online, many of which intersect with each other. It’s likely that you have multiple motivations for wanting to blog, in which case it’s a good idea to determine your primary and secondary reasons and let them guide your decisions on the content and form of your blog.

### *Your (personable) professional profile*

Your blog can act as an extension of or replacement for what are frequently at best restrictive and at worst dysfunctional or non-existent institutional or organisational staff profile pages (especially if you are on a temporary and/ or fractional contract). Your research blog can present your professional profile to the world and act as the common centre of information to which your other social medial profiles point (see Carrigan, “How to Disseminate and Promote Your Research Online” and “How to Use Social Media for Public Engagement in Your Research”). But your blog can also do much more than your CV or a biographical note and list of publications and activities on a departmental website: “Any piece of academic writing not only shows the world who you are as a scholar, it also makes you a particular kind of scholar. [...] As you write, you also create your scholarly self” (Thomson, 2020, n. pag.). Here, you can highlight your work and demonstrate your experience, abilities, and professional services. Your blog allows you shape and showcase your profile as a researcher and take control over your professional identity as your career develops, making it a useful resource for those wanting to know more about you and your work.

### *Beyond the paywall*

At the heart of almost every blog lies the desire to share, be it to receive feedback, draw attention to your profile and your work, or maximise the wider impact of your research. Indeed, Mark Carrigan (2017) notes that “research commentary plays a crucial role in the public understanding of science. It mediates access to research,

sometimes providing a more accessible articulation and other times providing a critical focus” (n. pag.). Unlike most academic journals or books, blogs offer an opportunity to publish material without prohibitive paywalls or hefty price tags. The absence of the former means researchers are able to reach those without the privilege of access to costly databases or academic libraries, be they independent scholars without institutional affiliations, researchers whose organisations do not subscribe to or stock a given publication, or community groups, third-sector organisations, individual members of various publics, or businesses without reasonable access to research publications. Blogging makes you and your research globally accessible to those who may otherwise be unable to find your work, creating greater transparency and accountability, too.

### *Engagement, impact, and knowledge transfer*

Those outside or on the peripheries of the research community have valuable contributions to make to your research and thinking. The increased accessibility of a research blog creates engagement opportunities that go beyond dissemination and allow you to learn and benefit from the expertise of others within and outside of the academy, making for potentially powerful, productive collaborations. Instead of simply sharing your knowledge and experiences via a virtual one-way street, blogging enables you to create content that encourages and facilitates immediate discussion, exchange, and feedback from other researchers and those with non-academic expertise from industry, policy making, practise, third-sector work, and the lived experiences of individuals or communities. The conversations generated by a blog – in the comments section of a post, via a contact form, or wider social media communication – can provide data that evidences your work’s impact (within and outside of the academy) and public engagement. Next to this qualitative evidence, blogs also offer easy access to quantitative data, such as visitor figures and demographics, all of which can be used to showcase the relevance and effect of your research.

### *Writing differently*

Without restrictive guidelines, journal aims and objectives, minimum and maximum word counts, deadlines, and editorial interventions, your research blog provides you with an opportunity to break out of the traditional practices and confines of academic

writing and creatively tailor your content, its form, language, and length, to suit you, your subject, and your readers. Alas, as Mark Carrigan discusses in his guide on “How to Disseminate and Promote Your Research Online”, and as I detail later in this guide, online writing, including blogging, does come with its own set of guidelines and best practices to consider for both your benefit and that of your audiences, and if you are considering contributing to an existing, collaborative blog, then those, too, will come with some rules and prerequisites, often for good reasons. Yet, blogging offers a freedom and flexibility that many traditional academic publications do not, including the ability to combine research findings with personal, creative, and critical reflections on methods and processes as well as best practice.

### *Writing regularly*

While writing something that is accessible to the whole world may seem a rather counterintuitive cure to the dreaded fear of the blank page at the beginning of a new project, the freedom offered by blogging also means some researchers find it a useful tool to get them writing regularly and in smaller chunks, as well as perhaps more informally than they might in an article, chapter, report, or book toward which they are working. After all, blogs neither need to be published publicly (there are usually “draft” or “private” options for your posts and pages), nor do they need to be widely (or at all) advertised once they are, or at least not until you feel ready. You may find working on a blog editor in a browser far less pressure than the very officially titled document you create on your preferred word processor, and all the perceived and real expectations, deadlines, and pressures that come with it. Posts, even when published, can be edited, revised (though remember there will always be a cached version somewhere), and they have no externally imposed due date.

### *Communities and networks*

It is no longer a secret that research can be isolating, especially (though by no means exclusively) as a doctoral student or early-career scholar, and in disciplines in which working (including writing) in teams is less common than in others. Blogging about your research questions and findings as well as sharing reflections about the processes, contexts, challenges, and joys of research and your individual experiences can prove valuable to your intellectual and emotional processing as well as forging meaningful connections and collaborations with others, both within and outside of the

academy. Other researchers may share the challenges and frustrations you have experienced with a particular methodology or topic (and perhaps have found a suitable solution or circumvention). Whereas conference presentations can provide immediate feedback for and useful conversations about your work-in-progress, your blog, especially when complemented with other social media profiles (see Carrigan, “How to Disseminate and Promote Your Research Online”) can facilitate similar, fruitful, short or long-term discussions and elicit suggestions that may help your work develop. Equally, research presents its own personal challenges, and as many collaborative and individual blogs have shown over the past decade or so, it is highly unlikely you are the only one grappling whatever issue you’re facing. Writing and sharing can provide useful ways of supporting your personal, emotional, and intellectual development. That said, in the final section of this guide I provide some things to consider when blogging on topics that lie at the intersections of the personal and the professional.

### **Engaging your audiences**

Once you have determined your reasons for wanting to blog, there are a few things to consider when you start to create your content, be it for your own blog or for a collaborative one, including length, language, focus, and format, all of which, to varying degrees, depend on the purpose of your blog and its intended audiences, but some of which are relatively universal.

While academic publications (such as journal articles, essays, reports, data sets, and books) rely on extensive detail and, thus, usually are of considerable length, your readers won’t want to encounter a scrollbar into oblivion when accessing online content. As a researcher, you are trained to consider your subject in depth, with all its complexities, to consider anything relevant that has been said on it before, and provide as much evidence as necessary to make a credible contribution to your field.

As a research blogger, you will have to master the fine art of communicating your work in a way that remains credible and accurate but is also engaging and much more succinct. Jimmy Manning (2021) has highlighted that academic blogging is characterised by a tension between expedience and credibility (p. 216). That is, while

blogs are more accessible, they also fall prey to prejudice that shelves them “as less sophisticated; as a soft landing place for lower-quality scholarship; or even as pandering to the public” (p. 216). As such, Manning rightly cautions scholars to “be aware of these credibility threats and [...] to inoculate against them by providing clearly identified supporting resources and using the same rigor or standards they would use for more traditional research dissemination” (pp. 216–17).

Yet, size – or rather succinctness – matters. The internet is full of articles making claims for an ideal word count range for blog posts, and I’m aware you are now reading this sentence in the hope that each of its words will bring you closer to that magic number, only to discover, around about now, that I won’t provide you with one. In reality, the nature and focus of your blog as well as the specific topic of your posts should dictate the number of words you write. Write enough to make for a meaningful post, but only as much as you need to communicate what you want your intended reader to know.

To do this, you need to write with a clear purpose, and for that you need to know for whom you’re (primarily) writing as well as what exactly you want your post to achieve.

#### *Fellow researchers and students*

Other researchers or your students might find your blog when researching a topic or, indeed, researching you. Perhaps they don’t have access to your paywalled publications, or this is the first time they have come across your work at all, making your blog their gateway to your work. It is also not uncommon for members of a job interview panel to research shortlisted candidates online.

#### *Third-sector organisations*

Members or employees of charities, political pressure groups, and other third-sector organisations whose work intersects with your own. They may be looking for evidence to inform their professional practice, support work, or campaigns. They may be open to collaborating with researchers on new projects that can support their work. Your work may, for example, help improve their advocacy, or (in)directly improve individual or community wellbeing.

### *Public policy makers and public services*

Your research may provide evidence for policy making and contribute to changes in government policy, or it may be relevant to public services, for example, by helping change compliance rates, enabling easier access to services, improving access to services or the ways in which they are delivered.

### *Industry and business*

Your research may have relevance to a particular industry or business, for example by contributing new technologies, materials, ideas, evidence, or concepts that impact on their operations, sustainability, staff wellbeing, production processes, efficiency, or costs.

### *General publics and interest groups*

Individuals or community groups may find your blog in their research on a personal interest, including, for example, family, local, or regional history, literature and culture, political issues, or any other topics that affects them personally or in which they have an interest. Your work may increase understanding and awareness.

### *Teachers and pupils*

Teachers and pupils may find your work when looking for resources to help them teach or study for their subject. Your work may also impact ways in which education professionals deliver certain subjects.

### *Journalists and media*

Journalists, editors, and producers may find your work when looking for experts on a current topic or when looking for new content to commission. They may want to contact you to ask for your comments on a current issue, or to discuss a potential contribution in form of a print publication, a radio programme, or television.

To whom you want your blog to be useful and informative will determine the information you provide and the way you present it, and this includes your permanent content, such as your "About Me" page as well as your individual blog posts. While a biographical note written for academic audiences may well provide intricate details about your current research topic in highly subject specific language, this will do little

to give other readers a good overview of your experience, qualifications, skills, or indeed the relevance of your work to them when they first land on your homepage.

Similarly, consider the purpose of each blog post. Why are you writing it and who, ideally, would you want to reach? Consider your language and whether it will be easily understood by someone who does not work in your field or indeed in research, if this is the intended audience of your post. Policy makers are likely to use a different vocabulary to the media or teachers, for example. Equally, if you are hoping to reach individuals who might benefit from your research or want to communicate with existing or potential participants, think about the tone of your content and how you can best connect with those readers on a personable yet professional level.

Different aspects of your work may be relevant to different audiences, and each post should clearly set out its purpose and give your reader a sense of why its content is likely to be important to them. Timing, too, matters, especially if you are hoping to have an impact on policy, contribute to current news topics, or want to capitalise on a time of year when a relevant topic receives particular public attention. While fellow researchers may be very interested in the details and challenges of your research methodology, other audiences will simply want to know your findings, or indeed a particular aspect of them.

Consider also whether the aim of a post is to send information out into world or whether you particularly want to stimulate discussion or knowledge exchange. Do you want non-academic stakeholders to respond to an issue you discuss and share their expertise with you? Do you want to hear from individuals with lived experience of something you're researching? Rather than hoping for these outcomes, make them explicit in your posts, be it in the form of open invitations or clear questions. As Manning highlights, "by opening themselves to public dialogue – especially when readers are allowed to comment on blog posts – academic bloggers are doing what all bloggers do: creating a relationship with readers" (p. 202).

The visual presentation of your content matters, too. Just like nobody likes the prospect of reading through pages and pages of terrible handwriting (apart from very dedicated historians), long blocks of seemingly never-ending text in a beautiful but



illegible colour and font are likely to make your visitors navigate away from your blog as quickly as they found it. Remember, your audience does want to read your work, but you shouldn't make them work for it.

The presentation of each individual piece of content, too, should make it easy for your reader. Write in shorter paragraphs than you would for other types of publications, and where possible and appropriate, break up text with relevant images or illustrations (which are either free to use or to which you own the copyright). And while this guide is predominantly concerned with text-based blogging, you may also want to consider the appeal and efficacy of other media, such as podcasts, or video blogs (vlogs), both of which can significantly increase the reach, accessibility, and appeal of your work, and can also be embedded in your blog.

In summary, to make sure your blog is effective in communicating your work and engages your intended audience, take some time to reflect on who you want to reach, what parts of your work may be relevant to them, and how you may have to change your communication style, especially your terminology and tone, as well as the way in which you format and present your writing accordingly.

## **Common concerns and ethical issues**

### *Research ethics*

If your research requires approval by a research ethics committee, the processes and measures stipulated in your ethics assessments also apply when you talk about your work online. Check whether participants have consented to their data being used or quoted in publications, and, if so, if this is limited to particular types of publications. Check if you need to obtain new consent to use their data in your blog posts, and make sure you adhere to the level of anonymity to which they consented. Depending on the type of study or project, it may also be appropriate to share any relevant posts with participants.

### *Authorship and copyright*

If your research is carried out as part of a team, you will need to discuss with them about what aspects of the research it is appropriate to blog about, and whether this should be done jointly or individually, including who will be listed as author of a post. In some cases, blogs are titled after and dedicated to one specific project, and posts either credited to the project (or all its researchers), or to respective researchers responsible for individual pieces of content. Be aware, too, that posting a published version of a journal article or book chapter, for example, is unlikely to be within your rights. Check your contract or author's agreement, and only post versions of your work that your publisher permits you to. Conversely, you may well be concerned about putting your work online for fear of it being plagiarised. While it's not unheard of (both with or without a research blog), my answer to this concern has always been and remains the same: blogging allows you to publicly put your name to your ideas; your virtual stamp, as it were. And while it does not prevent people from plagiarising your research (which arguably many other academic activities, such as conference papers, don't either), it certainly means you have associated your name with your work. Additionally, you can consider adding a Creative Commons licence to your blog, allowing your readers to reuse your work in certain forms (determined by you according to the licence you choose) providing they credit you as the original source.

### *Getting it wrong*

Another common worry, especially from early-career scholars, is that you may blog something on which you later change your mind. This can happen with journal articles, books, and chapters, too, no matter how rigorous our research, the peer reviewers, or editors. The point of research is that it is evidence based, and if our evidence changes, usually our conclusions do, too. If they do not, then our integrity is rightfully called into question. Research is always work in progress, even once it is printed on paper, even if that progress is made by someone else after you have concluded your work. Research is rarely finite, and blogging, arguably, allows us to be more transparent about this process, to reflect more openly, especially at a time when research, evidence, and expertise seem to be devalued day by day.

### *How much and how often*

Blogging about your research is work, and it's important you treat it as such by making it a realistic component of your workload and prioritise strategically according to your other duties and activities. Don't blog for the sake of blogging. That is, don't blog if you have nothing to say. Rather than setting yourself an unrealistic goal that will be counterproductive and unsustainable in the longer run think about an initial list of three to five topics about which you want to blog. What do you want to share, why, and with whom? Regularity will build a readership, but whether you blog once a week or once a month or every four or six months should be determined by whether you have something to say and where blogging lies in your priority list.

### *Blogging the personal*

Blogs about the personal and professional perils of research, academia, and higher education have vastly grown in popularity and number in the past ten years. It's almost ten years since I started *The New Academic*, and the Guardian's *Academics Anonymous* began not long after. Blogging about your personal experiences of research work can be (and has been) incredibly powerful, can build and contribute to supportive communities, and help effect change. What you want to publish on your blog is an entirely individual choice, whether you cover exclusively your research findings, reflect on your personal research journey(s), or address personal issues that affect your work. If you are uncomfortable to discuss a topic with strangers in the street, your email inbox, or your social media messages, then I strongly advise you not to put it out there on a worldwide platform. Principles can be expensive, especially as an early-career researcher in a precarious employment market. What will your next job interview panel think if they see a blog post about your mental health struggles for example? In an ideal world, they would appoint you based on your intellectual abilities and other skills, and make reasonable adjustments for you in your new workplace. In the real world, you will have to make pragmatic and strategic choices about what personal information you share and where, and what consequences you are willing and able to bear as a result, whether they are defensible or not.

## Conclusion

Blogging has become a common component of research work, and it is important to recognise it as such. While the possibilities it presents often make it a refreshing, enjoyable, and creative way of disseminating and developing your research, it is important to remember that it is a part of your workload, and as such it's crucial to be strategic about why you blog and what you want to achieve by doing it. Reaching a few dozen engaged readers is arguably more valuable than a thousand fleeting clicks. This guide has provided a starting point to identifying the reasons you want to blog, determining who your intended audiences are, what to consider to effectively engage them in your research, and what wider issues to think about before publishing your content online. Although the online world seems defined by speed and instant gratification, having a clear strategy and aims for your blog that are more realistic and refined than vain hopes for immediate world domination and a readership of millions will help you maintain your enthusiasm, focus, and integrity for this powerful way of communicating your research online.

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