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WRITING WAYWARD WOMEN: WHY BLOG THE HISTORY OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND'S FEMALE OFFENDERS?

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Abstract

This article considers the multiple uses of academic research blogs for crime historians with particular reference to graduate students and early career researchers. Research focussed blogs help to develop the ideas and narrative styles of writers, provide vital opportunities for 'virtual colleagueship', and offer researchers valuable opportunities for networking and engagement both inside and outside of universities. Whilst there are some concerns to be raised over protection of authors' work, and the current lack of recognition for the effort and benefits involved with running a research blog, the opportunities to connect with the rich landscape of digital resources in the history of crime are too good for academics to be able to dismiss the gains to be made by blogging.

Keywords: research blogs, use of blogs in academia, female offenders and offending

Introduction

In the last decade or so blogging has moved from the fringes of the internet to become a 'widespread and widely understood medium' through which a range of professional bodies and individuals communicate.² More recently there has been a surge in the uptake of blogging by those who work in higher education. Several suggestions have been made as to why academics feel the need to engage in blogging both inside and outside the academy.³ These can range from improving personal and professional skills like writing and refining ideas to more practical career objectives such as expanding readership for work, promoting oneself as a researcher, and contributing to the more general academic pursuit of expanding knowledge.⁴ There are even those who go as far to argue that blogs can 'enrich and extend academic discourse'.⁵ In short, for a range of reasons blogging can help academics to 'do their jobs better' by thinking, communicating, and networking.⁶

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² G. Kirup, 'Academic Blogging: academic practice and academic identity', *London Review of Education* 8(1) (2010), 75.

³ A distinction must be made here between academic research blogs, like my own, and other kinds of academic blogging. This article focuses only on the former - blogs which create a space in which individuals divulge, discuss and explore elements of their professional research - or offcuts and connected themes thereof. Whilst no less prominent, or valuable, blogs based around an academic persona in which work, leisure, and broader aspects of higher education or personal life are discussed form a separate area of the digital landscape and are not considered in the discussion below.

⁴ I. Mewburn and P. Thomson, 'Why do Academics blog? An Analysis of Audiences, Purposes and Challenges', *Studies in Higher Education* 38(8), (2013), 1105.

⁵ H. Estes 'Blogging and Academic Identity' in *Literature Compass* 9(12), (2012) 974.

⁶ Mewburn and Thomson, 'Why do Academics blog?' 1106.

As a postdoctoral researcher and recently completed PhD student I have first-hand experience of academic blogging, the benefits it can yield, and the problems and challenges it poses. [WaywardWomen](#) is a free to access blog hosted on the [Wordpress](#) platform which I began in April 2012. The focus of the blog was my doctoral research which examined the lives of female offenders in Victorian England and has since expanded to incorporate elements of my present work.⁷ Initially the blog was intended to be a fortnightly exercise where I would create a post of approximately 1,000 words in which I considered an aspect of my research. This has since become less regular but the content of the blog has remained largely the same. My blog has primarily been based on the life-grid case-studies I was exploring in the second year of my studies. The content of such studies could be diverse, from the case of Eliza McDermott and her daughter Elizabeth, who were convicted of the murder of their son and brother John McDermott in their slum dwelling in Liverpool, to the case of the upper-middle class 'Bishop Sisters' who were notorious 'kleptomaniacs' in the wealthy London suburbs of Kensington and Chelsea. Whilst individual topics were highly variable each post offered details of the lives, experiences, crimes, and punishments of women offending in Victorian England. In most cases text would be interspersed with images of people, places, or documents drawn from the rich visual resources available to historians of crime. In the following article I assess the reasons for, and value of, blogging the history of crime and criminal justice.

1 Space, Ideas, and Skills

The first and most often cited reason for creating a blog is that by doing so the author provides a new space in which to explore and develop their work and their skills. Research blogs create an informal place in which scholars can start 'thinking about issues' that will eventually get formal academic attention but which need to first be developed in a more casual way.⁸ In this sense 'blogs represent a relatively transparent and unedited view of thinking-in-progress'.⁹ More than this, blogging can actually be where we do some of our most creative and ground-breaking thinking: where we test out ideas and arguments that do not fit into traditional scholarly outputs.¹⁰ WaywardWomen is a space in which I have been able to start discussing and shaping new ideas and narratives before they are fully formed. In my first year of blogging, for example, I published a post entitled 'Little Hell' in which I took

⁷ L. E. Williams, *'At Large': Women's lives and offending in Victorian Liverpool and London* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Liverpool, 2014). See also: http://www.digitalpanopticon.org/?page_id=255 (accessed 7 August 2014).

⁸ Estes, 'Blogging and Academic Identity', 974.

⁹ A. Halavais, 'Scholarly Blogging: Moving towards the Visible College' in A. Bruns and J. Jacobs (eds), *Uses Of Blogs* (Peter Lang Publishing: New York, 2006), 118.

¹⁰ See Tim Hitchcock's 'Historyonics' blog: <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/> (accessed 6 August 2014).

the opportunity to pull together all the information I had been collecting about Liverpool's infamous red light district. The post included newspaper reports of the area, some incomplete biographies of the prostitutes and brothel runners who worked there, and even the beginnings of a map of concentrated brothel locations. For me, the purpose of this exercise was not to present firm conclusions about the area or the nature of women's lives there, but to explore the range of sources available and the information I could utilise. Blog posts can also offer the opportunity to receive feedback and encouragement at what can often be a crucial stage of development. Positive comments I received on my post for 'little hell' made me far more confident in the benefits of incorporating environmental analysis into my final thesis.

Blogs allow academics a dedicated forum in which to explore ideas and practise arguments before they are committed to formal academic pieces: to shape writing and narratives in new and unfamiliar ways. The virtue of a blog over a notebook for this purpose is that we are encouraged to finalise and finish new thoughts rather than jot half-formed ideas out on the page never to be returned to. The early stages of writing my own blog coincided with attempts to begin writing my research into a thesis, blogging was immensely useful to cultivate the habit of shaping and letting go of ideas that were rounded but not in their finely processed end-state. Bloggers can also find that the process of writing in this forum encourages them to consider more fully the nature of academic writing whether that be completing thoughts rather than leaving gaps to be filled in later or rounding a series of connected ideas into something coherent for a post.¹¹ In this way I found authoring a blog assisted me in becoming more confident in both my academic writing and also in how to shape and express ideas.

Formal academic writing demands time and effort in the pursuit of perfection, that is the essence of the craft and the objective of the peer review process, whereas blogs 'allow for the rapid dissemination of unfiltered material, changing the speed, reach and practice of reporting, knowledge, sharing, and idea generation compared to traditional avenues such as print media'.¹² By forcing researchers to quickly shape and release ideas, blogging can rapidly help build confidence in our raw instincts and assumptions. Blogs encourage 'fast writing and thought rather than deep consideration and reflection' and whilst this is not an

¹¹ Kirup, 'Academic Blogging', 80.

¹² D. A. Powell, C. J. Jacob and B. J. Chapman 'Using Blogs and New Media in Academic Practice: Potential Roles in Research, Teaching, Learning, and Extension' in *Innovations in Higher Education* 37 (2012), 272.

approach that could ever replace scholarly writing it is not a bad thing either.¹³ Fast thinking, writing, and discussion of ideas is a separate and important set of skills that academics can often neglect. Similarly, having to write for an undefined, and often unknown, audience is a thoroughly different exercise from writing for a strictly academic or specialist group. Powell, Jacob and Chapman have also argued this, stating 'social media has been reported to help researchers communicate effectively with diverse audiences at remote distances and across disciplinary divides'.¹⁴ Once again, whilst this might not be a skill that is essential for the day-to-day life of academics, it can improve professional interactions both inside and outside of universities. My own experience and a number of studies would suggest that, quite simply, blogging has the capacity to make us more reflective, open, and responsive scholars.

2 Who is Blogging For?

The concept of an audience for ideas, arguments, and research is another key incentive for those that blog. Whilst private blogs can still help with the development of writing and ideas, the most useful and successful blogs have to be 'read, debated, and commented upon'.¹⁵ For this there must be a readership. Most blogs are set up for the benefit of the author and an immediately familiar audience such as departmental colleagues, fellow PhD students, early career colleagues, or a small section of colleagues in the writer's subject field.¹⁶ For me, this might be the 30 to 50 people I regularly came into contact with at conferences like the British Crime Historians Symposium or the 'Our Criminal Past' Network. An audience like this can be invaluable in evaluating, discussing, and even critiquing the ideas posted on a blog. In this way the audience can act like an informal peer-review process for fledgling ideas and work. Through positive ratings, comments, or longer discussion the feedback received on blog posts allow researchers to engage in 'peer debate' to share early results or to seek help with experimental issues.¹⁷ The major benefit to this is that ideas are expanded, adapted, or defended from a much earlier stage in light of feedback, and simultaneously the exchange of perspectives on work can occur much more quickly than the formal peer-review process - taking hours or days rather than months and years. Blog posts can perform the role that traditional conference papers offer, but much more often, quickly, and a more specialised and engaged audience. Blogs do not seek to replicate or in any way replace the

¹³ J. Walker, 'Blogging from Inside the Ivory Tower', in A. Bruns and J. Jacobs (eds.), *Uses Of Blogs* (Peter Lang Publishing: New York, 2006), 136.

¹⁴ Powell, Jacob and Chapman, 'Using Blogs and New Media', 273.

¹⁵ L. Terblanche and A. Goodwin-Davey, 'Academic Blogs: A Platform for Sharing Information and Disseminating Knowledge' in *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 31(3) (2013), 376.

¹⁶ Kirup, 'Academic Blogging', 79. See also A. Crymble. 'How blogging and Tweeting Make Me a Better Historian of Crime' Conference paper given at Our Criminal Past: Digitisation, Social Media and Crime History (London Metropolitan Archives, May 2013).

¹⁷ Powell, Jacob and Chapman 'Using Blogs and New Media', 273.

function of the peer-review process, but nonetheless blogging can be seen to represent an 'additional mechanism for the sharing and discussion of ideas, approaches, and evidence'.¹⁸

3 Developing a Network of Virtual Colleagues

The use of other social media sites such as Twitter helped me to become aware of the similar efforts to blog being undertaken by a number researchers and writers. I and other bloggers are able to establish 'loose communities' by linking blogs together 'through comments, reactions, and hyperlinks'.¹⁹ Blogs can help foster a kind of 'virtual collegueship'.²⁰ Connecting to other similar sites and materials through a blog (and vice versa) can create a rich network of resources all related to the same central ideas, interests, and themes. The history of crime and criminal justice enjoys just such a successful network. The creation of this kind of virtual connection helps to encourage research, collaboration, and the 'sharing of knowledge'.²¹ Blogs remain one of the best ways in which individuals can exchange ideas with those they have yet to formally meet, and an unexpected way to create opportunities for interaction and collaboration.²² Not only is this immensely beneficial to those individuals within the network (see above comments on audience and informal peer review), but can also form a valuable mine of information for interested outsiders too. Blogging can make possible the kind of community or research clusters that many scholars find is lacking in their institutional lives.²³ Visitors to [WaywardWomen](#) will find links to similar sites such as PhD student Nell Darby's <http://criminalhistorian.com/> which displays not only Nell's doctoral work, but also her interest in more popular histories of crime in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Also there are links to, John Carter Wood's <http://pacecase.blogspot.de>, Helen Rogers' <http://convictionblog.com/> and larger, collaborative, undertakings such as <http://www.digitalpanopticon.org/>.²⁴ The Digital Panopticon blog, as an example, shares the findings and progress of the AHRC funded project 'The Digital Panopticon: The Global Impact of London Punishments 1780-1925'. Interestingly, when completed, the website itself will form a ground-breaking resource for

¹⁸ Ibid, 280.

¹⁹ Halavais, 'Scholarly Blogging', 120.

²⁰ C. Bond Porter, 'Virtually a Historian; Blogs and the Recent History of Dispossessed Academic Labour', *Historical Reflections* 38(2), (2012), 84.

²¹ Powell, Jacob and Chapman, 'Using Blogs and New Media', 272.

²² Ibid, 272.

²³ Bond Porter, 'Virtually a Historian', 85.

²⁴ In his blog John Carter wood used the forum as a tool to promote awareness and discussion of his upcoming work 'the most remarkable woman in England'. This is a space in which he was able to use some of the evidence and ideas that had not made it into the formal text. The blog continues to run after the release of the book, providing a digest of how the book has been received by the scholarly community and beyond. A site run by Liverpool John Moores University lecturer Helen Rogers offering a different perspective on the history and materials used for her forthcoming book, *Conviction: Stories from a Nineteenth-century Prison*. Posts explore the lives and experiences of Great Yarmouth convicts as well as interesting facets of prison life.

those interested in the history of crime in England and Australia. Informal networks of blogs like this that connect similar researchers together in this way can also mutually expose each other to the vast interest that exists outside of academia.

4 Engaging with a Wider Audience:

The history of crime and criminal justice occupies a unique position in academia. Firstly because so many of its rich resources are digitised such as the [Old Bailey Online](#), convict research via [Founders and Survivors](#), the [British Transportation Registers](#), the forthcoming [Digital Panopticon](#), detailed textual sources such as the 19th Century Newspapers and [Harvard Criminal BroadSides](#). This drives academic crime historians and related academics and researchers online almost daily. But more importantly than this the field also enjoys a huge engagement by the public and popular media, and genealogical community (such as the three million subscribers to ancestry.com). I soon realised that blogs like [WaywardWomen](#) can provide another piece of the rich research tapestry being created by digitisation. Interested parties who have found an individual via the Old Bailey Online or newspapers and who want to know a bit more about the offence, or the individual's experience of prison during their sentence of penal servitude can look to blogs like mine.

Blogs and online communities of researchers and writers provide 'access for individuals and organisations that may otherwise be excluded from gaining these insights due to geographical or financial barriers'.²⁵ Quite simply blogs lower the barriers 'to communicating directly to the public'.²⁶ The interconnectivity of blogs, RSS feeds, and twitter accounts ensure that readers will find one blog through another and pass it along and so on and so forth. Despite the primarily academic nature of [WaywardWomen](#), linking with other blogs and researchers and highlighting my blog via social media has introduced my work to a surprisingly large public readership. By reaching (and being promoted by others) outside of my own institution and established academic circles my blog has made contact with casual readers as far apart as Canada and Australia as well as those with a specific interest in Women's History, the History of Crime and Criminal Justice, or particular case studies I have posted. I have also been contacted by archives wanting to showcase their own criminal justice collections, such as the Tyne and Wear Archives with their criminal 'mugshots' collections.²⁷ I have had contact from genealogists who are interested in the cases I examine or approaches I have taken with my research. One of my most popular posts, which dealt with the life narrative of an unwed mother convicted of the attempted murder of her child

²⁵ Powell, Jacob, Chapman, 'Using Blogs and New Media', 274.

²⁶ Halavais, 'Scholarly Blogging', 122.

²⁷ https://www.flickr.com/photos/twm_news/sets/

(and received over 1,500 unique views in one day), was met with comments from three genealogists from Australia and the UK all researching the same case. I have found references to my blog in the most unexpected places - such as a publication by the Ontario Genealogical Society - illustrating just how diverse and far reaching the interest in a blog can be.²⁸

5 Giving a Little and Receiving a Lot

Perhaps one final, beneficial, and most unexpected reason to write a blog like [Waywardwomen](#) is as a shameless tool for self-promotion. Although it should be noted that creating a blog as an 'avenue for self-publicity' was not found, in a study of academic bloggers, to be an explicit reason for the creation of their sites, nor was it one of my own intentions, it has proved itself to be nonetheless a very useful by-product of blogging.²⁹ In a popular and crowded field of academia like the history of crime, blogging represents the best way to advertise a professional identity and research specialism and to present or tease out the nuance and unique elements of your work. This is most especially the case for graduate students and early career researchers who are looking to establish themselves in their fields before having had a chance to build up as substantial body of formal academic work. For these kinds of academics, myself included, a blog like [WaywardWomen](#) can help in the navigation of 'the power structures of academia' which traditionally demand a well-established career before an academic reputation can be built.³⁰

Some have suggested that a blog allows the writer to create a separate 'identity' from that of their academic persona. This might mean tackling a tangential (or even completely different) area of research from their formal academic work, or perhaps offering an alternative perspective on the work carried out in the professional sphere.³¹ However, the most effective use of a research blog - particularly for PhD candidates or early career researchers - is as an effective tool for creating and reinforcing a primary academic identity. By providing a space to advertise themselves and their work, and to carry out what Gill Kirup refers to as 'performative writing', blogs enable individuals to create or reaffirm their academic self, and to introduce that self to a potentially world-wide community³² Something hard for most researchers to achieve even with their formal publications.

²⁸ http://origin.library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1109815385000-57/Toronto%20Tree%20July%204_2014.pdf (accessed 6 August 2014).

²⁹ Kirup, 'Academic Blogging', 79.

³⁰ J. Walker, 'Blogging from Inside the Ivory Tower', in A. Bruns and J. Jacobs (eds), *Uses Of Blogs* (Peter Lang Publishing: New York, 2006), 127.

³¹ Estes, 'Blogging and Academic Identity', 976.

³² Kirup, 'Academic Blogging', 76.

In the first year of blogging my site received over 10,000 unique views. Over one third of those were from outside Britain. This was both hugely gratifying and reassuring for me as an academic at the start of a long and steep career path. More importantly it is also testament to the phenomenal resource blogging presents to academics wishing to gain a bigger audience for their ideas, widen awareness of their work, and create a unique and highly visible space in which to display their expertise. Without blogging there would have been little or no potential for my work and my ideas to reach far outside of my peers within my department, and the group of academics that have helpfully evaluated my work-in-progress papers at conferences. Running a blog has helped me and many others to communicate more efficiently. I have been able to reach far more people in order to tell them who I am and what I do. Blogs can usefully be linked to the other online avenues available for professional and social networking such as Twitter and Academia.edu to provide a more in-depth example of work, research and ideas. For researchers at the very beginning of their career firmly establishing an identity and body of work within your chosen subject area is one of the hardest things to do. Amber Regis, writing for the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, suggested that postgraduates often constitute 'invisible members of departments' and find blogging a unique and highly effective method of promoting and increasing professional visibility.³³ In such cases blogging can act as both a quick and effective introduction to the academic world (even producing opportunities to speak at conferences or contribute to special issues of journals), and a worthwhile supplementary activity to continue alongside other outputs.³⁴

By the promotion of the author and their work to a wide audience a blog is also uniquely placed to secure opportunities for researchers that journal articles do not. Blogs can - and in all likelihood do - reach far more people far more regularly than academic publications.³⁵ Blogging is a hugely valuable tool for those interested in outreach, dissemination and engagement. In my own experience it was my work on WaywardWomen, rather than my formal academic presence, which produced interest from places like the BBC (local radio and television production) and others who recognise the mass appeal that histories of crime offer. Such individuals and organisations found my name online associated with the subject either directly through or on account of my blog. Likewise, a blog can make historians more visible to schools and community groups, this both helps to disseminate research further than traditional avenues, but also allows academic bloggers to more easily organise the

³³ A. Regis, 'Early Career Victorianists and Social Media: Impact, Audience and online identities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17(3), (2012) 357. Regis uses the example of Bob Nicholson's now hugely successful blog the Digital Victorianist (<http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/>)

³⁴ See, for example, blogs by John Carter Wood, Tim Hitchcock, and Helen Rogers.

³⁵ Estes, 'Blogging and Academic Identity', 980.

much coveted public engagement, outreach, and impact experiences so important to modern scholarship.

6 Drawbacks of a Digital Presence:

There are, of course, some serious pitfalls when it comes to academic blogging. There are a number of small considerations that every academic blogger must weigh up to find the right equilibrium for their own work. For example soon after starting a site most bloggers will have to consider the balance of posting regularly enough to keep their blog relevant to the field, but infrequently enough to maintain focus, clear identity, and, above all, quality. These are questions of contemplation rather than impediment though. However, there are some larger problems facing academic bloggers. Powell, Jacob and Chapman stated that 'barriers to social media use include the lack of clarity over the precise benefits that might accrue to the researcher and uncertainty related to a variety of factors including authority, trust, moral rights, and copyright'.³⁶ The largest concern amongst these is the issue of acknowledging copyright and intellectual property. The position of blog authors when it comes to these issues is still not fully clear. There is a spectrum of severity when it comes to the loss of ideas. These range from what might readily take place at any conference, a fellow academic being inspired by the ideas another has offered but who then fails to acknowledge such a debt in future works, to the clear plagiarism of material, narratives, and ideas by other written sources.³⁷

My own experience of blogging provides a cautionary tale for the latter of these two scenarios. In May 2013 I published a blog entitled '[Birmingham's Brewery Blacklist](#)' which explored a relatively unknown set of criminal records available online. The next month, a paraphrased version of my post - including counts and conclusions I had produced - appeared on several [well-known](#) online news sites. Supplied to them by a news agency with an interest in 'curating' the best of the internet and other media, the story was reproduced with no credit to the original blog post whatsoever. The large online community of history bloggers shared my outrage whilst at the same time informing me that this experience was not uncommon. Short of legal action (which can prove time-consuming, expensive, and very often fruitless in the face of major news corporations) there is little recourse available to academic bloggers that find their work used without permission in this way.

³⁶ Powell, Jacob, Chapman, 'Using Blogs and New Media', 273

³⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/dec/04/academic-blogging-newspaper-research-plagiarism> (Accessed on 6 August 2014).

Of course, work published via a blog is not inherently more likely to suffer from plagiarism than traditional academic outputs. However, the wider, more diverse, and unknown, audience garnered by blogs does in some ways make plagiarism more of a risk. Likewise, the still developing legislation around internet copyright and online property can make options for redress more difficult to navigate.

The issue of the ownership and protection of bloggers materials does not only exist outside of universities in the world of public engagement. Blogs constitute part of a broader online identity that many academics find it useful to cultivate in their professional lives but a clear tension exists between the individual's profile, and that of the institution to which they belong. For bloggers there remain unanswered questions on both sides about the level of control universities can and should expect over an individual's blog content. Although far more of a problem in the sciences than arts and humanities, there is also the question of how freely and informally externally funded research findings can be shared. No doubt, with ever-increasing attention cast on the use of social media in all professions, these contentions will be more clearly addressed for academics in the next few years.

The secondary concern for academics who blog, or are thinking of doing so, is that blogging is unfortunately not 'recognised as an academic product'.³⁸ Despite clear advantages to blogging the practice remains unrecognised as a legitimate output in any of the professional assessments used in academia. Therefore for many academics, particularly those whose careers began prior to the digital age, blogs become 'irrelevant because they don't count as publication'.³⁹ University and even departmental support for academic bloggers can be minimal. Reactions to blogging can range from indifference to active discouragement based on the idea that scholars should not be investing time (which could be spent on peer-review outputs) in an activity with no quantifiable benefits to their institution.⁴⁰ The experience of blogging is not the same for everyone. Each individual must weigh up the benefits and disadvantages of running a blog. However, despite the problems associated with blogging - using current research to create a blog and to link in with the on-going digital dominance of histories of crime is something that, in my experience, provides far more benefits and opportunities than it does drawbacks, and something I am very glad to be a part of.

³⁸ Kirup, 'Academic Blogging', 76.

³⁹ G. Lovink, *Zero Comments. Blogging and critical internet culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

Conclusion

Blogs remain a growing facet of academic life. A blog is a valuable accessory for any academic, a tool based on the most basic facets of scholarship; writing, sharing information, and encouraging discussion. Blogs provide an opportunity to build and express our professional identities, whilst at the same time engaging with the huge community of academics and non-academics alike interested in our criminal past. Blogging allows academics to raise their own profile and carve out new professional opportunities whilst simultaneously offering something back to the general public who so often fund our research and keep our subjects relevant. Blogs are also a staple of the digital landscape. With digital crime history set to drive the discipline forward in the coming years it might be time to recognise blogs on the history of crime and punishment as an integral part of the system which they already are. They provide a much needed bridge between formal sources and discussions of crime history, and the wider audiences keen to know more and engage with them.