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Early career Victorianists and social media: impact, audience and online identities

Something is changing in Victorian Studies. How we communicate, how we engage, how we share ideas—these professional acts are being transformed by the rise of social media. In 2010 this journal launched *Journal of Victorian Culture Online*, hosting teaser previews of forthcoming articles, open-access book reviews, conference announcements and useful links. And yet this site is not simply an online noticeboard. It invites participation; readers can comment on posts and contribute their own to the ‘Victorians Beyond the Academy’ forum. Social media have also penetrated the academic calendar. Last year’s annual British Association for Victorian Studies conference at the University of Birmingham—on the theme of ‘Composition and Decomposition’—was the first to have a dedicated Twitter hashtag: #bavs11. In panels and plenaries you may have heard the light tapping of fingers on iPad, iPhone or Blackberry, the muted sound of delegates responding to papers in short online posts. Over the course of the conference, twenty-three Twitter users posted 260 tweets.¹ These numbers may be small when compared to the use of Twitter at large conventions—for example, MLA 2011 in Seattle achieved a staggering 8,761 tweets from 1,439 users—but they mark a significant shift in the way we experience academic conferences.² Delegates following the #bavs11 hashtag could engage with papers as they were being delivered and glimpse snippets of

¹ James Mussell has produced an archive of the #bavs11 tweets, accessible from his blog: ‘British Association for Victorian Studies Annual Conference 2011’, *Jimmussell.com* (15 February 2012) <<http://jimmussell.com/2012/02/15/british-association-for-victorian-studies-annual-conference-2012/>> [accessed 15 February 2012].

² @MLAconvention, ‘Stats from #mla12: Total tweets excluding RT/MT: 8,761 Number of contributors: 1,439 Top 10 contributors: 22.7% of total tweets’, *Twitter* (6 February 2012) <<https://twitter.com/#!/MLAconvention/status/166371801885179904>> [accessed 15 February].

debate in parallel sessions. *Twitter* was also able to extend the reach of the conference beyond the four walls of Birmingham's Business School. Interested Victorianists were able to participate in absentia, following and contributing to discussions online. *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* serves a similar purpose, providing a virtual space within which academic hierarchies are unsettled, where readers are contributors (and contributors are readers), and where Victorian Studies is open and accessible beyond the academic ivory tower. This is why social media are so important; they are able to create and sustain inclusive communities.

Social media are legion and constantly in flux. In recent years we have witnessed the rise and fall of giants such as *MySpace*, and abortive attempts to launch new platforms such as *Google Buzz*. But while names and faces may change, the underlying principles remain the same: social media are online tools that enable users to create, connect and communicate, to produce and disseminate content. For the purposes of this article, I will confine myself to the academic use of a social media mainstay: blogging. The OED's first reference to 'blog' dates from 1999, which makes it the grandfather of social media.³ *Twitter*, by comparison, is a young upstart, but there are strong family resemblances. *Twitter* is a form of micro-blogging, the regular posting of short updates of no more than 140 characters. If a blog is often compared to a diary (albeit a very public one), a tweet is a postcard. A quick glance at the #bavs11 archive reveals that social media are being used by Victorianists at all stages of their professional career, but there is an explosion of activity amongst those who are career young: postgraduate students and early career academics. To dismiss this phenomenon as the result of a generational divide, in which dusty

³ blog, n. *OED*, 3rd edn, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/256732>> [accessed 16 February 2012].

professors and wired-up, plugged-in junior colleagues are separated by gulf of misunderstanding, is to elide a whole range of influencing factors. Using a series of case studies, I will examine the motives behind early career Victorianists' use of social media, how they are self-fashioning online identities and fostering networks, and I will ask one question: why?⁴

Social media gaffs are now a common source of entertainment—the inappropriate comment, the joke backfired, the awkward apology. Fears of exposure and embarrassment haunt their use for professional purposes, but such anxieties are testament to the power of social media to construct a public image. Paul Dobraszcyk, a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at the University of Manchester, acknowledges and celebrates this element of self-fashioning. Indeed, the promotion of a diverse online identity was a primary motive for starting to blog:

I wanted to take control of how I represented myself. I didn't find academic profiles on university websites very appealing because they seemed quite narrow to me. I wanted to represent the many facets of who I am and what I like doing—painting, photography, writing and travel.⁵

Dobraszcyk blogs at *Rag-Picking History* <<http://ragpickinghistory.co.uk>> where he provides a strikingly visual account of his research into Victorian decorative cast iron, where short histories of Victorian leisure, industry and material culture are punctuated by photographs taken on research trips. A thorough academic CV is provided alongside a page of links to publications, but many posts and pages range beyond Dobraszcyk's immediate research field and his work in the academy. The

⁴ It is time to declare an interest. I am an early career Victorianist; I write a blog at *Looking Glasses At Odd Corners* <<http://amberregis.blogspot.co.uk>> and I use *Twitter* (@AmberRegis). As such, my own experiences will colour the arguments that follow.

⁵ Paul Dobraszcyk in correspondence with the author, 5 February 2012.

interests listed above are all represented, including artwork across different media, including watercolour, oils and collage, and photographs documenting travel to far-flung places such as Syria and Chernobyl in the Ukraine. *Rag-Picking History* promotes the fusion of Dobraszcyk's creative and academic work, evident in posts that consider urban regeneration and contemporary art and the site troubles popular conceptions of academic history as a pursuit confined to dusty archives.⁶

Bob Nicholson is a postgraduate student at the University of Manchester, recently appointed Lecturer in History at Swansea University. He researches Victorian popular culture and the periodical press, making use of new digital archives. This interest in the digital humanities provides the inspiration for his blog, *The Digital Victorianist* <www.digitalvictorianist.com>. In contrast to Dobraszcyk's emphasis on diversity, Nicholson's online self-fashioning is a fascinating study in academic identity as unique brand (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Brand Identity: *The Digital Victorianist* Banner and Logo. Image courtesy of Bob Nicholson.

Nicholson *is* the digital Victorianist; he has his own logo (a top hat and computer mouse), an author photograph (also in top hat) and an integrated *Twitter* account

⁶ See, for instance, 'The Ancoats Peeps', *Rag-Picking History: Unearthing Hidden Places and Pasts* (3 October 2011) <<http://ragpickinghistory.co.uk/2011/10/03/the-ancoats-peeps/>> [accessed 16 February 2012].

(@DigiVictorian). His posts are unified in terms of subject matter, featuring reviews of digital resources and reflective pieces on the methods, benefits and problems of their use. Under the sign of the top hat and computer mouse, all things coalesce. Nicholson and Dobraszcyk thus forge very different online identities, but their sites share a common purpose: to promote and increase professional visibility. Postgraduate students are often invisible members of departments, lacking any detailed profile on institutional sites. And where a profile is granted, they are often formulaic, adhering to fixed templates and pouring their subject into a narrow academic mould. Blogging serves to counter this exclusion and pigeonholing, enabling users to construct an autonomous, self-managed online identity. Nicholson captures this zeitgeist best when he explains *The Digital Victorianist* provides 'something for people to read when they Google my name.'⁷

But why are postgraduates and early career academics so concerned with online presence and their place in the Google rankings? In a fiercely competitive job market, where hundreds of applications are received for each vacancy, candidates are constantly seeking to distinguish themselves and add value to already overburdened CVs. At the time of writing, a job advert in my own academic field is making use of new and telling phrases; it requires applicants to develop a 'modern portfolio of research skills' and to demonstrate 'imagination in terms of the dissemination of research findings' (emphasis added). This advert makes explicit reference to impact and public engagement, while the job itself is part of a new wave that requires applicants to think beyond the academy and traditional routes of publication. A successful blog is an effective means to demonstrate responsiveness

⁷ Bob Nicholson in correspondence with the author, 4 February 2012.

to these new agendas in research assessment and external funding. And it is no longer a possibility but a very real likelihood that selection committees and appointment panels will Google the names of applicants. Rather than a drunken photo on a Facebook profile with inadequate privacy settings, how much better to discover a well-crafted online identity? Appropriate use of social media can help to make the right impression before setting foot in an interview room, setting you apart for all the right reasons. Nicholson's logo and 'Digital Victorianist' brand are instantly recognisable and speak to his dual expertise in history and digital humanities. Dobraszcyk's site, by contrast, offers a range of attractive skills and interests relevant to a higher education context concerned with outreach and non-specialist audiences.

But there are dissenting voices. In 2006, blogging in the context of US higher education and systems of tenure was compared to an 'extreme sport.' Junior faculty were warned that blogging was a risky business stealing time away from more legitimate academic activities and raising fears of negative exposure.⁸ Similarly, a 2005 article on *The Chronicle of Higher Education* website proclaimed that 'Bloggers Need Not Apply'. Objections were raised over the poor and inappropriate content found on many blogs, the sloppy and the confessional, the 'cat better off left in the bag.'⁹ I would argue, however, that the context has changed irrevocably in the last seven years. Social media are more prevalent and their professional use, for teaching and research, is more common. In UK higher education, universities are making use

⁸ Christine Hurt and Tung Yin, 'Blogging While Untenured and Other Extreme Sports', *Washington University Law Review*, 84:5 (2006), pp. 1235, 1237 <<http://lawreview.wustl.edu/inprint/84-5/hurtyin.pdf>> [accessed 17 February 2012].

⁹ Ivan Tribble, 'Bloggers Need Not Apply', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (8 July 2005), para 6 of 25 <<http://chronicle.com/article/Bloggers-Need-Not-Apply/45022>> [accessed 17 February 2012].

of social media to promote their activities, engaging with students and the broader academic community. The founding in 2011 of the London School of Economics' *Impact of Social Sciences* blog (<<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>> and @LSEImpactBlog on *Twitter*) has been a watershed moment. Here the benefits of social media are a credo, with posts ranging from the impact on downloads when research papers are featured on prominent blogs to the relationship between social media and peer review.¹⁰ *Impact of Social Sciences* has also produced a popular 'how to' guide for academics considering using *Twitter*.¹¹ While the skepticism of some commentators provides a timely reminder of the need for carefully controlled online profiles, the rise of the impact agenda in UK higher education has undoubtedly challenged old prejudices.¹²

In setting out the assessment criteria for impact in the REF, guidelines released by HEFCE begin to unsettle hierarchies of writing and audience. This is not yet a full-scale revolution; social media as a general term appears just once in the *Panel criteria and working methods*, while blogging receives one further mention as

¹⁰ David McKenzie and Berk Özler, 'Academic blogs are proven to increase dissemination of economic research and improve impact', and Alfred Hermida, 'Social media is inherently a system of peer evaluation and is changing the way scholars disseminate their research, raising questions about the way we evaluate academic authority', *Impact of Social Sciences* (15 November and 27 June 2011) <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/11/15/world-bank-dissemination/>> and <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/06/27/social-media-is-inherently-a-system-of-peer-evaluation-and-is-changing-the-way-scholars-disseminate-their-research-raising-questions-about-the-way-we-evaluate-academic-authority/>> [accessed 12 April 2012].

¹¹ Amy Mollett, Danielle Moran and Patrick Dunleavy, *Using Twitter in university research, teaching and impact activities: A guide for academics and researchers* (LSE Public Policy Group, 2011), <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/files/2011/11/Published-Twitter_Guide_Sept_2011.pdf> [accessed 17 February 2012].

¹² Mark Carrigan, a postgraduate student at the University of Warwick, has produced a Prezi outlining the benefits of creating a 'successful online presence': 'Creating a Successful Online Presence', *Prezi* (28 January 2012) <http://prezi.com/4gcem_vg2wuf/creating-a-successful-online-presence/> [accessed 18 February 2012].

a potential citation source beyond academia.¹³ But in dealing with public engagement as an impact of research in the subject areas covered by Main Panel D, social media haunt the spaces between the lines. In order to measure our contribution to ‘public discourse’—how our work ‘enhance[s] public understanding’—HEFCE asks for evidence of ‘reach’ and ‘significance.’¹⁴ Reach suggests a multiplicity of audience, of individuals and groups beyond the university sector, while significance is concerned with change, with measuring the extent to which audiences are ‘enriched, influenced, informed.’¹⁵ Traditional methods of dissemination are too often locked behind expensive subscriptions and paywalls, or couched in an alienating academic language, to achieve this reach and popular significance. Social media, however, provide a (virtual) paper trail for impact. Their use requires a different performance, a voice appropriate to their open, inclusive nature. But more than this, social media allow you to know your audience and enable them to speak back. Evidence of dissemination alone will not constitute impact, but comments, replies, tweets and retweets are an immediate source of ‘third party engagement’ and ‘user feedback or testimony’ as required under the REF. As conversations and interactions grow over time, they will provide a tangible footprint of ‘sustained or ongoing engagement.’¹⁶ Social media are also able to provide supporting quantitative data: links, hits, downloads and analytics tools can

¹³ HEFCE, *Panel criteria and working methods* (REF 01.2012) (Bristol: HEFCE, January 2012) <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/pubs/2012/01_12/01_12.pdf> [accessed 18 February 2012] (pp. 72, 91). I will use the assessment criteria for impact set out in Section D3—part of the guidelines for Main Panel D—as the most appropriate to the audience of *Journal of Victorian Culture*. Arguments, however, are applicable across REF panels.

¹⁴ *Panel criteria and working methods*, pp. 89, 93.

¹⁵ *Panel criteria and working methods*, p. 93.

¹⁶ *Panel criteria and working methods*, p. 91.

help to measure reach, constructing a picture of your audience, of traffic sources, geographical spread and usage over time.

With the REF driving recruitment and promotion, it is vital for early career academics to be well versed in its rules and requirements. Blogging and *Twitter* provide a space within which they can demonstrate an awareness of public engagement and the impact agenda, writing for and conversing with new audiences. Charlotte Mathieson, an Associate Fellow in English at the University of Warwick, has been blogging since 2007 shortly after she began her PhD. *Charlotte's Research Blog* <<http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cemathieson/>> is hosted on her institution's website, but this does not delimit her audience. Indeed, Mathieson courts the non-specialist and recent posts include discussions of the 'Dickens 2012' celebrations and Anthea Arnold's film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*.¹⁷ These short essays explore what she describes as the 'contemporary cultural resonances' of her research into Victorian literature and nineteenth-century mobility, and they require a particular discipline:

This means writing from a different angle: thinking about what is going to engage a general reader, or a Victorianist who is reading in their leisure time. As well as a shift in language and tone, this involves stepping back from the research to think about wider connections, meanings and implications in what I'm talking about.¹⁸

Blogging can raise fears of dumbing down. Andrea Doucet, herself a blogger, describes the act as 'fast and thin'; blogging is the hasty hare in comparison to the

¹⁷ Charlotte Mathieson, "'Can you shew me the places?"; Dickens 2012 and literary tourism' and 'Wuthering Heights', *Charlotte's Research Blog* (1 and 6 December 2011) <http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cemathieson/entry/can_you_shew/> and <http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cemathieson/entry/wuthering_heights/> [accessed 12 April 2012].

¹⁸ Charlotte Mathieson in correspondence with the author, 5 February 2012.

‘slow and deep’ tortoise of traditional academic writing.¹⁹ But Mathieson argues for a more intellectually rigorous and reciprocal relationship. The reflective stance described above, in which she looks again at her work from ‘a different angle’, provides an essential ‘intellectual refreshment’: a means to refine and develop ideas, to work on the clarity of their expression. Writing for a non-specialist audience can thus form part of the research process; it encourages interaction and dialogue, shaping ideas and informing later outputs. Thus understood, public engagement is something that occurs while research is taking place and not simply after the fact. In making this process visible and interactive, social media can demonstrate integral links between impact and ‘underpinning research’—another key concern of the REF.²⁰

All of my case study bloggers use *Twitter* (@Dobraszczyk, @DigiVictorian and @cemathieson) and all admit to using it as a form of self-promotion, advertising and linking to papers, publications and blog posts. *Twitter* is also helping to raise the profile of several major Victorian Studies projects. For example, @carlyleletters posts amusing and timely quotations from the correspondence of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. On the occasion of Dickens’s 200th birthday in February 2012, followers were treated to a glimpse of the Sage of Chelsea’s friendship with the famous novelist: ‘Adieu, dear Dickens; come soon back to us, and let me see you then.’²¹ Significantly, interested readers who discover this account are just one click

¹⁹ Andrea Doucet, ‘Scholarly Reflections on Blogging: Once a Tortoise, Never a Hare’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (3 January 2012), para 23 of 25 <<http://chronicle.com/article/Scholarly-Reflections-on/130191/>> [accessed 19 February 2012].

²⁰ *Panel criteria and working methods*, p. 90.

²¹ @carlyleletters, “‘Adieu, dear Dickens; come soon back to us, and let me see you then.’ - Thomas Carlyle>Charles Dickens #Happy200thBirthday’, *Twitter*, 7 February 2012 <<https://twitter.com/#!/carlyleletters/status/166933045914513409>> [accessed 20 February 2012].

away from *The Carlyle Letters Online* project website

<<http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>>. *Twitter* is thus an expedient means to reach new audiences and direct traffic to research and resources online.²² But it is more than a broadcasting tool; *Twitter* comes into its own as a form of online networking.

The fragmentary nature of *Twitter*, in which your feed collects together a series of short posts, can raise anxieties concerning the trivial and banal—for how can anything of significance be conveyed in just 140 characters? To counter this, I would offer two responses. Firstly, you get the *Twitter* feed you deserve as its contents are dictated by the accounts you choose to follow.²³ Ernesto Priego compares the academic use of *Twitter* to a process of curation: the careful selection of groups, organisations and individuals with whom you wish to interact:

If curated properly and if there is the honest will to share work, information and knowledge; to collaborate and interact beyond professional fears, envies and selfishness, a *Twitter* timeline can become a lively combination of seminar, workshop and library where academia is no longer preaching to the converted, and where academics can learn from those outside their inner circles.²⁴

Priego's vision of democratic engagement provides a second response to skeptical opinion, for the significance of *Twitter* lies in its networks, fostering dialogue, debate

²² Victorian Studies projects and organisations using *Twitter* include *Dickens Journals Online* (@Dickens_DJO), Victorian Poetry Network (@vicpoet), The North American Victorian Studies Association (@navsa) and major journals in the field: *Victorian Studies* (@VictStudies) and *Journal of Victorian Culture* (@JofVictCulture).

²³ I have produced a list of Victorianists on *Twitter*, from academics to enthusiasts, projects to impersonations: <<https://twitter.com/#!/AmberRegis/tweetvictorian>>. It currently stands at 175 members, but this number continues to grow.

²⁴ Ernesto Priego, 'Your Brain on Computers: Some Notes on *Twitter* as an Open Research Community', *HASTAC: Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory* (29 November 2011), para 9 of 9 <<http://hastac.org/blogs/ernesto-priego/your-brain-computers-some-notes-twitter-open-research-community>> [accessed 21 February 2012].

and exchange. Again, postgraduate students and early career academics are leading the way in establishing these productive, online communities. Researchers working across all disciplines are able to offer support, advice, ask questions and share good practice, coming together by marking their posts with #phdchat or #phdpostdoc hashtags. There are also discipline-specific communities, such as #twitterstorians (History) and #TwitCrit (Literary Studies). Priego draws a useful comparison with traditional, face-to-face modes of academic discussion, and this is a benefit echoed by Bob Nicholson: 'It feels like I'm part of a community—one that gives me the communication and comradeship of a conference all year round.'²⁵ Postgraduates and early career academics are constantly encouraged to network the field, to attend events and engage with peers and senior scholars, to make their names known. *Twitter* provides a new and powerful means to forge connections and raise visibility, where networking is continuous and conversations can span continents and time zones.

At the closing plenary session of the British Association for Victorian Studies conference in 2011, a panel debated the future for our multidisciplinary field. Sarah Parker was asked to provide a 'postgraduate perspective' and she concluded with a provocative statement: 'The value and future of Victorian studies relies, not just on where *you* [established academics] are, but on where *we're* going.'²⁶ For postgraduates and early career academics, this destination is mapped out in terms of a saturated job market, the rise of impact and public engagement, and an increasing awareness of online identity, networking and multiple audiences. The future for

²⁵ Bob Nicholson in correspondence with the author, 4 February 2012.

²⁶ Sarah Parker, 'The Future of Victorian Studies: The Postgraduate Perspective', *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* (7 October 2011), para 8 of 8 <<http://myblogs.informa.com/jvc/2011/10/07/the-future-of-victorian-studies-the-postgraduate-perspective/>> [accessed 21 February 2012].

Victorian Studies is therefore inextricably linked to innovation on the social web, and here the career young are setting the standard.

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