An Englishman's Blog is His Castle: names, freedom and control in medievalist blogging

At the International Medieval Congress at Leeds last year, I had been running A Corner of Tenth-Century Europe for about two and a half years and it was beginning to become known even among my academic peers, who were in many ways the last to catch on.[1] None of those who did, however, were as mysterious in their reaction as a certain scholar who shall remain nameless—I shall identify them only by a t-shirt they wore at the dance whose reverse read, "I conquered the Avars and all I got was this lousy t-shirt"—who told me, excitedly, "It's all about control! You're trying to control too much." They were carried away by Terpsichore before I could find out what they meant.[2] I've been wondering about it ever since, and so this talk is going to ask the question: what do we, medievalist bloggers, control with our blogs, and what don't we?

Truth in advertising

I'll answer this with an unashamedly personal perspective, and a perspective acknowledgedly more positivist and mercenary than my co-panellists. I have been lucky enough to study and work in universities with lively medievalist communities, and have not had to endure isolation, but this probably engenders competition. My main reason for blogging was always to advertise myself as a scholar; an Internet-savvy scholar communicating to a wider audience, yes, but fundamentally a scholar. To that end I developed a style that one of my commentators has described as 'footnotes and flip'.[3] I wasn't thinking, when I selected my theme and wrote my first few posts, of joining a scholarly conversation or a virtual community; I was thinking of what a selection panel would see if they happened to Google me, and how I might convince them, faced with a CV mired in seemingly-infinite print queues, that I was a contributing and exciting researcher. So A Corner of Tenth-Century Europe has always been first and foremost self-serving, in accordance with Scott Adam's first blogger's prerequisite: the conviction, "The world sure needs more of ME."[4]

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[1] J. Jarrett, "You know, people are *reading* this thing", http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2008/11/12/you-know-people-are-reading-this-thing/, last modified 12th November 2008 as of 1 July 2010. All last modified dates below are also as of this date.

[2] Stuart Airlie, pers. comm., 15th July 2009.

[3] Kathleen Neal, commenting on Jarrett, "People are *reading* this thing", http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2008/11/12/you-know-people-are-reading-this-thing/#comment-3106, last modified 12th November 2008.

[4] Scott Adams, "A Little Ray of Bitter Sunshine", Dogbert's New Ruling Class no. 61 (October 2005), 'My Own Dilbert Blog', no longer on Adams's own sites, but archived at http://utaka.net/DNRC/DNRC-61.txt, last modified 27th October 2005.

To this end, the sidebar of my blog has a list of what I'm currently reading, where I will be presenting my next paper, and what titles of my work I'm currently actively progressing. I've no proof that anyone notices this but it was part of the original plan. It also has a long list of other blogs, selected according to a policy: they must have posted within the last quarter and have at least one medieval or ancient history post visible on the front page.[5] All that, as well as the Wordpress theme that dictates the colour, font and layout of the blog, I could control.

Obviously the main thing I could control was the content. I couldn't generate it all myself without essentially pre-publishing papers, which I didn't want to do as it's contrary to a lot of submission guidelines. I therefore had to draw on other people's material too. I quickly started reporting on seminars I went too, and on work I'd read; even so, nothing went up where I didn't have some contribution or criticism of my own to add.[6] There are a number of successful blogs that merely report other articles, aggregators we call them, and here I would mention especially David Beard's Archaeology in Europe, from which I learn something fascinating pretty much every time I log in even though he writes none of it himself.[7] I however wanted to make sure I stood forward in my material, so that's the way I wrote.

There are also footnotes. I have been told that these are one thing that make my blog distinctive, though plenty of other people use them. I'd rather be noticed for the heavy use I make of hyperlinking. Very often this was back to other posts of my own, but equally often not; the aim was to ensure that if someone not up to speed with medieval scholarship came upon the blog, they would find the obscure terms linked to something that told them more. This was not as altruistic as it sounds: I was well aware that search engines record and reward linking, and that the more I linked to the higher my Google ranking would become. Also, it's a way to add mischievous subtext, quite literally. Nonetheless, part of the idea was to increase outreach. The other feature of the blog to that end was that I began early on to illustrate heavily. Most of my posts carry an image between each paragraph, or some variation in format otherwise to break up the endless column of text. Very few are only text. I think this is important, not just for getting and keeping casual readers' attention but also for adding colour, quite literally, back to the medieval material.

Anyway, the blog is now, I'm told, known for the fact it presents actual academic research, that it references scrupulously and that it uses lots of

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[5] J. Jarrett, "Blogroll policy, and some more archaeological experiments", http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2008/07/15/blogroll-policy-and-some-more-archaeological-experiments/, last modified 12th June 2009.

[6] Eventually I indexed all the seminar reports on a separate page, "Seminars", http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/seminars/, last modified 29th June 2010.

[7] David Beard (ed.), Archaeology in Europe, http://archaeology-in-europe.blogspot.com/, last modified 29th June 2010.

images, and I'm happy with all of that and I can, of course, control it.[8] I can also control comments, of course; I try and answer them all, which again is part of looking active and engaged with the blog's public. I don't get a lot of abuse, and what I get is still there, answered with gentlemanly scorn or so I like to think. So I hope it's honest even if it's ostentatious.

Pseudonymity and Anonymity

All of this of course is an attempt to project an identity. The picture you get of me through A Corner of Tenth-Century Europe is highly filtered. It doesn't report failures. My love of weird rock music is hardly ever mentioned. I don't record personal events unless they're going to stop me blogging. I had learnt from my previous online experiences on Usenet and bulletin board systems, in fact, that it is very easy to give yourself away on the Internet, especially if you are there for a while. This was one reason why I never considered using a pseudonym. The main one, of course, was that there was no point plugging myself as a scholar without giving people my name, but I also thought it wasn't sustainable. I have seen anonymous bloggers and other internet users outed, often in inconvenient or disastrous ways. I will mention three cases, from the well-known to the little-known: there was not so long ago the revelation of Belle de Jour, the blog of a high-class prostitute who also turned out to be a cancer researcher, Dr Brooke Magnanti.[9] She appears to have survived as a researcher and indeed a blogger though I can't imagine the social difficulties she must have faced.[10] The international celebrity may help, of course. Less well-known but more worrying was Night Jack, a British policeman who ran a blog about policing from the inside until he was identified and forced to shut the blog down in disciplinary proceedings.[11] And little known to anyone but the academic blogging community was the blogger behind Damn Good Technician, who got into a similar situation for speaking out a bit too freely about colleagues who managed to identify her.[12] People who are using anonymity to blow whistles, vent frustration or even just ask for help that they feel they ought not to publically need are

[8] Thanks are due here to the blogger known as Another Damned Medievalist, with whom I had the chance to discuss all this very recently.

[9] Perhaps best described, with some interesting thought about authenticating authorship, in I. Knight, "I'm Belle de Jour", Sunday Times (15th November 2009), online at http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6917495.ece, last modified not available.

[10] She is now based at the Bristol University Institute for Child Health, as evidenced in their brochure, http://www.bristol.ac.uk/nsqi-centre/research/birch/birch-leafleat.pdf, last modified 25th September 2009.

[11] See for example A. Hirsch, "Publish and be named: Police blogger NightJack loses anonymity", The Guardian (16th June 2009), online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/jun/16/nightjack-blogger-horton, last modified date not available.

[12] Damn Good Technician, "Interruption in Service", http://damngoodtechnician.blogspot.com/2009/05/interruption-in-service.html, last modified 25th June 2010.

vulnerable to this.

Any successful blogger, too, is vulnerable to identification, because the more that they write about their subject of interest and their position in it, the more likely they are to be identifiable by someone who shares that subject of interest, and has quite possibly met them. 'The other' British early medievalist blogger, an old friend of mine who writes as Magistra et Mater, has recently started setting about navigating this transition ahead of time, recognising that as she piles out work about Carolingian masculinity, a small field, the chance of her remaining anonymous to people who know her work tends to zero and she may as well be ready.[13] She is ahead of the curve, but I always thought it far safer not to get on it, which obviously restricts what I can say. In this respect, I am not in control; rather, the audience controls me, although I control my response to those constraints. How much control is too much, at either end of this scale, is perhaps a philosophical question given the real-world factors at work.

Mediévistes sans frontières

One thing that we cannot control, however, as long as we persist in putting our words on the open Internet, is who reads them. Off this hangs something very important, which is that someone doesn't have to be a medievalist to find what we say interesting. Obviously we argue this to funding bodies all the time, but it is demonstrated nowhere so clearly as in blogging. Carl here occasionally gets linked by boingboing.net, which is pretty much anti-disciplinary as a forum; although it is substantially by geeks for geeks, the geeks are not concerned about what they should or shouldn't be interested in.[14] Among the blogs I link to is Thoughts of a Knowledge Geek, written by Doug Moncur who is an Australian information theorist who works on virtual learning environments. He just happens to love medieval and ancient history too.[15] His perspectives on digital humanities are frequently immensely enlightening. I have also had comments from archaeologists, anthropologists, graph theorists, biologists, geneticists, linguists and even one or two people whom I think thought they were economists, and from almost all of these I learn something.[16]

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[13] Magistra et Mater, "Pseudonymity and its Discontents", http://magistraetmater.blog.co.uk/2010/05/14/pseudonymity-and-its-discontents-8591664/, last modified date not available (posted 14th May 2010).

[14] C. Pyrdum III, "Welcome, BoingBoingers. Here, have a monkey! (Take two, they're small)", http://gotmedieval.blogspot.com/2008/03/welcome-boingboingers-here-have-monkey.html, last modified date not available (posted 14th March 2008).

[15] For example, D. Moncur, "Medieval warfare on the grid", http://knowledgegeek.blogspot.com/2008/07/medieval-warfare-on-grid.html, last modified date not available (posted 24th July 2008).

[16] I collect posts covering these subjects' links to medieval studies under the tag 'interdisciplinary conversation', http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/tag/interdisciplinary-conversation/, last modified date not available.

This relates directly to one of the questions we as panellists were asked to address, whether medievalists' blogs are distinctive.[17] To this my answer is almost entirely negative. No, I don't think they're distinctive, except by their material. More to the point, I don't think they should be. The blogosphere is not segregated by department: we can read in whatever subject we like. The digital humanities, in which we all take part, overlaps the edges of the humanities considerably, as we become involved in not just new media but new technology, in image recognition for palæography, in genetics for DNA studies both of man and beast, in database analysis, biochemistry for skeletal and organic analysis in archæology and in many other fields. These are all fields in which few of us have the time and learning to become expert, but bloggers, already intent on making their subject accessible to a wider audience, give us a route in. Blogging can, therefore, and should be inherently interdisciplinary, a clearing house for the quick study of a foreign subject with implications for one's own.

The scholarly conversation I want to contribute to now is therefore wider than medieval studies. By entering such conversations we are not just enhancing our own knowledge, but also representing medieval studies and the interest of its material to those outside the field. So, a certain amount of self-control on our parts is probably necessary, whether we do it explicitly or not.

And the audience applauds

In closing I want to scale down that question of audience and return it to the present gathering. A Corner of Tenth-Century Europe is now part of a scholarly conversation, though perhaps not to the extent of In the Middle where the conversation never stops! It is also in conversation with the wider world, but I have relatively little control over what bits. I can't even identify the audience: I have stats that tell me how many pageviews I get and what places people clicked in from, but only a tiny proportion of my page-views result in comments, so the commentators may easily be an unrepresentative minority.

Also, readers don't necessarily come to the blog for what I had hoped. Apart from the background queries like "medieval monk sex"—you would be surprised how popular an interest this seems to be—my single most viewed post is one drawing parallels about national identity between eleventh-century India, eighteenth-century Bohemia and tenth-century León in a tightly-argued four paragraphs.[18] I think it is actually one of the better things

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[17]   S. J. Trigg, "Pre-conference discussion on medieval blogging", http://stephanietrigg.blogspot.com/2010/06/pre-conference-discussion-on-medieval.html, last modified date not available (posted 29th June 2010).

[18]   "Setting ethnicities: comparisons across Bohemia, India and Catalonia", http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2008/10/22/setting-ethnicities-comparisons-across-bohemia-india-and-catalonia/, last modified 22nd October 2008.

I've ever written. This is not however what draws it its audience: that comes from the fact that I illustrated it with a rather nice aerial view of a town in Bohemia called Český Krumlov, which had been mentioned in the article about Bohemia I was reacting to. Eight months or so later, I began to get large numbers of search queries looking for images of the place, and discovered that my instance of the picture now considerably outranked the original site from which I'd got it (which belonged to the town's tourist board!) on Google. None of these searchers ever leave queries, and they arrive at a rate of between forty and a hundred a day. I concluded, eventually, that these hits are coming from some company in Bohemia whose computers' Internet homepages are set to an "I'm Feeling Lucky" search on Google for images of their town, or something similar, and that what I am seeing in my stats is not any kind of interest in what I was saying but simply someone coming to work and switching on a computer.[19]

This panel, too, has some very ambiguous aspects to it when my original blogging purpose is considered. I am not a Chaucer scholar, nor am I ever likely to be. I don't even work on literature. You who have been kind enough to come and listen to us today are never going to need to read my scholarly work; if you meet it at all, you will probably meet it on the blog. Similarly, I have only the most amateur interest in the subject of the panels here. I am here almost entirely because Stephanie asked me to come and talk about blogging. I'm not here as a medievalist except secondarily; I'm here in a somewhat surprising category as Internet celebrity. This was not something I ever controlled for and is not something I can entirely control. It certainly isn't what A Corner of Tenth-Century Europe was supposed to achieve, and yet it is clear to me now that what success the blog has had must ineluctably have this wider impact as a consequence. In that respect my anonymous interlocutor at Leeds may well have been right: the biggest things my blog does are those that are outside my control and all one can really do about that is to stop, or to keep on and hope it keeps working…

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[19]   J.   Jarrett,   "Metablog   VI: automated   search   queries?",
http://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2009/09/07/metablog-vi-automated-search-queries/, last modified 7th September 2009.