

Cultivating Community Through Academic Blogging

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Although academic publishing may seem a solitary exercise, this need not take place in a vacuum. This essay provides an example of one author's attempt to create an online community through a blog describing her ongoing book project. She describes how individuals resisted her attempts to foster interaction on the site; instead, they interacted individually with the author across various media in a "hub-and-spoke pattern," rather than with each other.

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"You have to sell the book before you sell the book." This sentence shaped my decisions, material and rhetorical, throughout the four-year process of writing a book manuscript. I had to build an *audience* before seeking a publisher, but I also needed to build a *community* throughout the research process. Those two pursuits aren't necessarily separate. The community I cultivated—to write the manuscript, to help me apply for grant funding, to advise me about publishers, to weigh in on book visuals—is a potential audience. This audience is comprised of my colleagues, advisors, family members, friends, students, administrators, and unknown others who found my blog, read my tweets, or somehow interacted with me. An academic blog can issue a collaboration invitation and encourage collective investment in the research process and products. My [blog](#), [mediamarathoning.com](#), created a wide pool of what I refer to as idea pollinators. These pollinators do not merely spread content: they forge something new in collaboration with the host. The book manuscript is part mine and part theirs. Putting this argument in Ed Black's terms from "The Second Persona," the implied auditors were implied authors.¹ Their "authorial tokens" reside next to mine all through the manuscript pages.

My Challenges May Be Your Challenges

Writing a book manuscript is never easy, but I felt my climb was steeper than others—because of what I had and what I did not have; because of who I was and who I was not. The focus of this essay is inspired by elements of Tom Benson's "Another Shooting in Cowtown," in which he provides an honest look at common academic stresses. In the beginning of his essay, Benson describes a rewarding film-making experience that created "an oasis of creative freedom for me, in the midst of the tenure-and-promotion chasing phase of an anxious academic career."² Not everyone will experience this anxiety, but many academics' professional priorities are shaped by tenure and promotion fears. These fears are not always compatible with desires to produce

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¹ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 111, 110.

² Thomas W. Benson, "Another Shooting in Cowtown," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67 (1981): 348

personally meaningful work. I have not created films or political campaign advertisements like Benson, but his work spoke to me. I hope that universals also course through the particulars here.

I wrote a book manuscript on media marathoning (my preferred phrase for what many refer to as “binge-watching”) as an assistant professor at a teaching school. The full professor down the hall told me: “I concealed the fact that I was writing a book as an assistant professor two decades ago because that administration did not look favorably upon research.” The associate professor down the hall told me: “The only reason I was able to turn my dissertation into a book is because I was battling a life-threatening disease, which bought me time to think and write.” Members of my department were suspicious that another assistant professor was writing a book, assuming the book was part of her efforts to get a better job.

The discourses surrounding book writing at my institution were not encouraging, but I encountered a supportive environment both within and without my college. Administrators endorsed my applications for external and internal funding. Colleagues graciously read my chapters early in the writing process and said uplifting things like, “I can’t wait to read your book” before I had a prospectus, let alone received a contract. My best friend from graduate school started working on the project with me but was not able to continue because of her heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities. She was integral to getting the project off the ground, transcribing many media marathoner interviews and dialoguing about the book’s initial structure. Students in my fall 2012 media marathoning class offered their ideas, shared their research, and embraced the process of discovery. We were not reading a book on media marathoning; we were creating the book. One student wrote on the end-of-semester course evaluation: “No one has studied this phenomenon and Nazareth students can be the first.” I could not have done this research without an extensive and giving professional community. To sell the book before you sell the book, think of it as a *Gemeinschaft* project.

My book manuscript-writing “climb” was steep not just because of heavy teaching responsibilities, but also because of significant care-taking responsibilities. I wrote *Media Marathoning* as a new mother. I received human subjects approval to interview media marathoners midway through my first pregnancy. I submitted the prospectus to a dozen publishers just after my second child was born.

In November of 2013, I was still nursing my six-month-old. My whole family came to the National Communication Association Conference in Washington, DC so baby and food would be together. The day after I had an encouraging meeting with an acquisitions editor, she saw me and my whole family walking to the National Zoo. I momentarily thought about ducking behind my tall husband. If she saw me and my posse of little people, would she have faith that I could actually deliver the book on time? Would this be the end of a possible contract? I quickly shoved those thoughts aside and waved my free hand at her (the other arm wrapped around the baby in the Bjorn). “Hi, Alison!” I called. Here is my life on display, I was saying. If you work with me, pandas will sometimes trump book pages.

Building a Site for Community

Travel back in time 2 years, 100 pages, and one child to learn how the cultivation of community began in earnest. One evening in May 2012, I asked my husband, Josh, “How much time would it take for you to make me a blog?”

Without looking up from his computer screen, he replied, “Well, I can set it up for you in a few hours, but the content you create will take time. It needs to be updated often. And you’ll have to learn a new style of writing. Your academese won’t work in that format.”

“Fun! I need a new writing challenge. Oooh, can you make the blog banner a combination of fonts from commonly-marathoned stories?”

“No problem.”

I had a blog shell a few days later. After a quick tutorial about editing, updating, previewing, uploading images, and hyperlinking, I was live with my [first post](#).

I had some training for this essay because my style of academic blogging is certainly autoethnographic. Brett Lunceford’s discussion of ethos as constituted in the discourse speaks to the generic challenges of both ethnography and academic blogs: “In order to be considered scholarly, we need to write in a scholarly way, and this is, unfortunately, disembodied and impersonal.”³ We will go “meta” for a moment and consider media studies professor Jason Mittell’s [blog post](#) about how blogs and other digital projects should be assessed with respect to hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. He includes this excerpt from a recommendation letter he wrote for an unnamed scholar (who is not me):

Her blog is written in a casual and humorous tone, and certainly makes no claims to be formally academic. However, the quality of her insights into film and other aspects of popular culture shine through the humorous tone. In fact, reading her blog before seeing any of X’s scholarship made me want to seek out her formal publications and read what she contributed to sites like Flow [....]⁴

In this rich quote, Mittell addresses scholarly convention, professional advancement, and the idea that audience members can use informal digital media content as a gateway to more formal academic writing. Through our more accessible, Web 2.0 writing, scholars can “sell” their ideas and traditional publications to a broader audience.

From an author’s perspective, I have found that blogging has not just drawn a greater audience for my scholarly work, but that it has actually helped me create scholarly work. The time equation does not initially appear to work out: more time for blogging means less time for formal writing, right? However, blogging actually energizes me as a writer, enhancing my creativity and idea flow. My blogging is personal, scholarly, and process-based. Each post presents a snapshot of my current thinking on the subject and a window into my creative process. This [post](#) from February 2013, for example, brings together my personal experiences, media studies terminology, and marathoner study discourse that came from my book research. Some of these ideas eventually made their way into my first chapters.

In addition to avoiding academese and writing in a personal and not detached style, I consider blog writing to have two major emphases not currently relevant to printed academic writing: blogs need to be visually engaging and interactive. The first features in the list—accessible, personal, and visually engaging—are like the brightly-colored petals that draw in the pollinators. Writers must use these features to encourage potential community members to accept the invitation to read further, to engage, and hopefully “pollinate” the text by spreading ideas in some form. The latter feature—interactivity—can only happen after that invitation has been

³ Brett Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 1/2 (2015): 5.

⁴ Jason Mittell, “Evaluating Digital Scholarship, or Confessions of an External Reviewer,” *Just TV*, March 23, 2014, <https://justtv.wordpress.com/2014/03/23/evaluating-digital-scholarship-or-confessions-of-an-external-reviewer/> (accessed June 17, 2015).

accepted. This list of blogging convention resonates with Robert MacDougall's argument: "Like no other communicative forms, [blogs] blur the distinction between what is public and what is private, between the individual and the group."⁵ In my blog, private mingles with public and individual is subsumed to group. The blog represents a "me," but through constitutive rhetoric, it ideally constructs a hybridized "we."

My initial readership was low when considering site stats and comments. I locked in a few pollinators by having my media marathoning students both create posts and comment on posts. After that, I learned I had to bolster my site's attractiveness. I included more links. I shrank my word counts. Even after I thought I improved the content of my posts, I hardly saw any comments. Friends "liked" and commented on the links I posted in Facebook, but they weren't commenting on my site.

"Let me try some bolded questions at the end of my posts. I genuinely want feedback. And I need to give readers a more visible sense of community and dialogue."

February, 2014: "Yes! Brittany responded about [ambiguously moral characters](#). She certainly gave me more to think about as I revise Chapter 12 this summer. Character agency and intentions matter to viewers."

I thought I'd draw in more comments once Brittany picked up the thread, but the exchange ended with my response to her.

The pollinator metaphor falls apart when I explain that I evolved to think of blogging interactivity as not just asynchronous but a-spatial. I was hoping to create a web of communication (and still am), but what I got was a hub-and-spoke pattern. People were not engaging one another in the comments section of my blog, but they were reaching out to me through multiple channels: Facebook, email, inter-office mail, and face-to-face communication.

Facebook message from Andrew, a graduate school friend: "Lisa, some of my students are writing a group paper on binge-watching. Can they email you?"

Email from Laurel, my former camper and current friend: "Lisa—My sociology professor talked about binge-watching in class the other day. I told him about your blog!"

Newspaper clipping in my work mailbox from Nevan, a friend and colleague: "Lisa, Have you seen this *Wall Street Journal* article about binge-watching?"

Encouragement from Jaime, a graduate school friend, when we met up at a conference: "I hear a lot of the same ideas conference after conference. Thanks for writing about something new."

I talked to Josh about the media marathoning project every night. Sometimes I reported interactions like those above. Other times, I asked his input on major ideas: "Does the redeemed traitor in commonly-marathoned stories need its own chapter?" Most frequently I made this simple comment to him to reaffirm the value of this time-intensive project: "I think I'm onto something new here." These scatter-shot face-to-face and computer-mediated comments about media marathoning maintained my confidence that many people had a latent need to read this research, a need that I could activate with the right rhetorical choices. My blog, and academic blogs in general, can thus be seen as channels for constitutive rhetoric.⁶ These interactive media sites facilitate participative rhetoric around which a community can coalesce.

⁵ Robert MacDougall, "Identity, Electronic Ethos, and Blogs: A Technologic Analysis of Symbolic Exchange on the New News Medium," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (2005): 575.

⁶ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois," in *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1993), 213, 219.

Lexington Books agreed that there was a need for this book. I do not know exactly what happened when the editorial board met, but I know that zoo visits be damned, the acquisitions editor advocated for me. I signed the contract when my youngest child turned 10 months old.

After a long spring and summer of revising the final manuscript, I got to put the finishing touches on the book. Just as a blog's visual appeal is essential for drawing in pollinators, a book's cover is often the first point of contact with potential audience members. Both blogs and books need to be aesthetically pleasing. I am no graphic designer, and I was torn between two different book covers when the time came to put on the book's finishing touches. In *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* fashion, I polled the audience.

When Josh got home that day, he remarked, "I saw that you put a poll in your blog. How did you do that?"

I responded casually, "I found a site that let me put in my question and answer choices then spit out the code for me to put in the blog. It wasn't hard."

I downplayed the difficulty level, but I was secretly proud that I taught myself something new. More importantly, I had a new form of engagement. Even people who did not care about media marathoning or commonly-marathoned stories could offer their opinions. ["Help Me Choose a Book Cover"](#) had 13 Facebook interactions and 40 votes. The numbers are not staggering, but they signaled an investment in me and in my work. My mother-in-law laid out her decision-making process in the blog comments section: "Although I like the look of Cover 2- I think Cover 1 captures the essence of your book." As I met up with my new friend Lynn to go for a run, she greeted me with the announcement: "I picked 'book houses!' I'm glad it won!" I was just glad she cared enough to click and converse.

I have *Media Marathoning: Immersions in Morality* in hand, but I do not expect that all people (even pollinators) will love the book. Manuscript reviewer two questioned if media marathoning deserved a book-length study and also opined, "I'm not a fan of author's including asides about their personal viewing [...] [T]hese sorts of personal comments can be distracting." Contrast that with reviewer one who noted, "I found this to be an exciting area of scholarship that opens up new avenues for exploring contemporary media texts and their use by audiences today" and "appreciated the author's discussion of his/her own experiences with marathoning." The reviewers' debate about the inclusion of my personal experiences gestures towards varying attitudes toward autoethnography. Can we learn from personal observations or is a more objective epistemology the most valid path to knowledge? As I revised the manuscript for publication, I clung to reviewer one's notes of optimism and retained the hints of autoethnography.

Book writing is challenging, no matter the circumstances. Despite various stumbling blocks one might encounter—a reviewer who offers criticism that is not of the constructive variety, publisher rejection, a chapter that refuses to be written, family members who resent the time commitment a book requires—an academic blog and the community you cultivate around a research project can help produce a stronger work, one with a more robust idea gene pool. Improved site stats, increased conversations about media marathoning, and media coverage of my work reaffirm that WE are indeed "onto something."