

Scholarly Voice and Professional Identity in the Internet Age

by Douglas Harrison

*“One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that it is to say, without risking oneself.” —James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.*

Over the past several years, I’ve become acutely aware of the fluid nature of the scholar’s identity and how personal and professional roles in higher education can collide as I juggle being an assistant professor and a blogging academic (or *blogademic*). Moving between these two roles has been both challenging and rewarding (in terms of my identity and career) in ways that speak to persistent tensions between scholarly and popular culture, as well as abiding concerns about what it means to be an academic in contemporary society.

Most discussions of the blogademic dilemma imply that this new phenomenon represents a clash of cultures: the institutional, discipline-driven culture of credentials and review and sweaters with elbow patches on the one hand; and on the other, the vox populi, idiomatic, off-the-top-of-my-head culture of pajamas and bed-head and comment-thread flame wars that is the blogosphere. While this description might capture the disparate styles of academic and Internet discourse, it’s not especially accurate or helpful to say that blogging pits the academic against the institution. The conflicts that the blogademic faces, after all, are —as the term “blogademic” itself suggests—a product of being a citizen of both worlds and their

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cultures, not a partisan combatant in a culture clash. As a blogging academic, I am as comfortable in a sweater with elbow patches as I am in pajamas and bedhead. The trouble starts when I imagine some of the people who know me as the guy in elbow patches catching a glimpse of me in my pjs and the fright-night hair I wake up with in the morning. For academics accustomed to carefully controlled rhetorical situations and ethical appeals (the refereed journal, the familiar intimacy of the small conference presentation, the classroom), blogging forces us to surrender a great deal of control—much more than we are used to giving up as teachers and scholars.

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In an insightful essay for the *Chronicle Review*, Henry Farrell notes that academic blogs “[connect] academic debates to a broader arena of public discussion” without “reproduc[ing] traditional academic distinctions of privilege and rank.”¹ Though “prominent academics who start blogging do have an initial advantage” based on their established reputations, they nevertheless “need to provide provocative and interesting content. Otherwise, they’re likely to fall by the wayside. By the same token, less-well-known academics, and nonacademics with interesting things to say, have a real opportunity to speak to a wider public and to establish a reputation over time.” In suggesting that we think of academic blogs as something like a contemporary Republic of Letters or “carnival of ideas,” Farrell suggests a way to move beyond the polemical thinking underlying so much of the blogademic debate.²

The anxiety surrounding academic blogs arises, as Farrell suggests, from their subversiveness. But it is a subversiveness born of the academic’s commitment to the intellectual enterprises and values embodied in—not opposed to—the institutions where blogademics work. As Robert Boynton noted on slate.com a couple of years ago, blogging might well be considered subversive “precisely because it makes real the very vision of intellectual life that the university has never managed to achieve.”³

Rather than a clash of cultures, we might speak more usefully of blogademics facing an internal conflict catalyzed by the mixed modes in which blogademics express themselves. Reformulated in terms of discourse and identity construction, the blogademic’s problem comes into better focus as an embarrassment of discursive riches. They are equally drawn to the formal rhetorics and styles of the academy and the looser, more conversational, non-specialist forms of writing typical of most blogs. Simultaneously involved in two very different modes of self-fashion-

ing, though, blogademics run the risk of a certain “status instability.” The French historian who blogs for non-specialist audiences is not just moonlighting as a virtual intellectual, but has become part of the popular culture; has gone from producing secondary sources to becoming a primary source. This work is not just about texts but is itself a textual production. With this transition from critic and scholar to creative non-fiction writer, the blogging academic gives up the security, comfort, and critical distance of the traditional teacher-scholar. The blogademic effectively shows up on campus in his pajamas and funky hair. And as this destabilization of roles disrupts the academic blogger’s sense of professional identity, it

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also unsettles the cultural norms of higher education.

I started my blog AVERYFINELINE: Criticism and Commentary on Southern Gospel Music and Culture (www.averyfineline.com) in August 2004. If I confess that this was almost exactly the same time I started my dissertation fellowship, you would be entitled to question the soundness of my judgment, both as a blogger and a young academic. I would like to say that I started blogging about southern gospel music and culture as an enjoyable and intellectually stimulating diversion from the rigors of the dissertation. I would also like to say I started blogging to uncover the reasons why I have remained interested in, and engaged with, a form of music from a world and a way of life that, in most other respects, I left behind half a lifetime ago. These things have all turned out to be true, incidentally, but this has mostly been dumb luck. At the time, I only registered the import of my decision to the extent that I tried to hide knowledge of my blog from anyone who I feared wouldn’t “get” what I was trying to do as a blogger.

There wasn’t any single aim or motivation driving my initial decision to start a blog. Rather, blogging emerged from the same complex of values, commitments, and curiosities that motivate me as a teacher and scholar. Blogging also creatively converges a set of related writing styles and habits of mind that would otherwise remain artificially segregated for me as a scholar—or, in a few cases, unavailable altogether. At averyfineline.com, these include music reviews, avocational musicology, cultural criticism, journalism, close reading, music appreciation, personal journal, salon-style conversations that emerge in some of the more successful comments threads and readers’ e-mails, and even a bit of the stargazing at entertainers popularized by *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Practically speaking, it’s fun. Here’s an excerpt from an August 8, 2008 entry, in which I contrast my fondness

for southern gospel music with other styles of Christian music:

Somewhere in the middle of Illinois, flipping through the dial and landing on some dime-a-dozen CCM [contemporary Christian music] singer/songwriter crooning away about “Your majesty and grace” in high breathiness, I realized the main reason I find this style of Christian music so obnoxious and off-putting: whatever the intent of breathy singing (assuming there is one), it has the effect of sexualizing the expression of religious ideas and spiritual themes, and of not-so-vaguely eroticizing the individual’s relationship to the divine—leaving me with images such as: Justin Timberlake trying to seduce the holy spirit. Ick.⁴

The convergence of the many different rhetorical modes, critical approaches, and writing styles I use online keeps alive for me the reality of the somewhat esoteric ideas I try to give particular shape and form to as a writing teacher: thesis, audience, purpose; discourse community; rhetorical situation and rhetorical appeals, authority, and, perhaps above all, voice. It’s not that these matters aren’t ever-present in my scholarly writing, but the wide-openness of writing for a Web journal dramatically destabilizes much of what is familiar to me about the writing process and product from my academic training.

When I started writing my blog, I didn’t know who would read it, if anyone at all. But when traffic spiked after I posted a link to my site on a few of the more popular chat rooms devoted to southern gospel music, I assumed my audience comprised mainly Internet-savvy fans, industry insiders, and maybe a few performers. Monitoring my traffic metrics and reading the e-mail and comments my writing generated, though, I began to see rather quickly that those assumptions were often unhelpfully narrow. As my archive filled with posts about a variety of



topics—from songwriting to evangelicalism and sexuality, and from theology to the comparative merits of the three-quarter time gallop over the even strides of four-four time signatures—I began to see the so-called long-tail effect of the Internet.

One aspect of the long-tail phenomenon describes the way little-known (one might even say obscure topics like southern gospel music and culture) come into demand across time among a devoted but very diverse demographic. These people are linked only by their shared interest in a particular product or service, one of the “millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream.”⁵ In the case of

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averyfinline.com, the niche is writing about the dominant artistic tradition within white evangelicalism from a non-sacred, humanist perspective. Somewhat to my surprise, I have found that my blog appeals to—and, in the comments threads, often brings together—people who wouldn’t normally interact with one another: industry insiders such as songwriters, producers, and record company executives; ordinary fans; and more than a few secularists who grew up with southern gospel and who, like me, continue to find themselves experiencing and only half-comprehending the same powerful pull of white gospel’s close harmony and lyrical preoccupation with the alluring mysteries of the soul’s striving after grace and salvation.

As far as I can tell, the common denominator for this culturally and intellectually diverse group of readers is a fascination with my blog’s way of relating to, writing about, and trying to understand southern gospel music as something other than strictly the soundtrack for mainline fundamentalist theology. Attempting to calibrate one’s bloggerly voice to such a diverse audience is, I like to imagine, akin to the paradoxical experience at the heart of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan spiritual diaries. Copious journals about the perfidious souls of early America were made vastly more interesting for the impossibility of the authors’ knowing if they were hitting the mark set by an invisible audience.

Fortunately, the eternal condition of my everlasting soul is not at stake (though some of my more orthodox blog readers would disagree). But the incommensurable backgrounds of my readers have thrown me back on my own instincts much of the time, forcing me to articulate to myself as I write for others why what I have to say about gospel music matters. My readership has steadily increased since I began blogging.⁶ In the absence of other evidence, I interpret this growing audience in large part to what I call voiciness: the way disparate styles of writing

and lines of thought about a topic—in my case, white gospel music—are fused into coherence by my blogging persona.

What I've read on other blogs written by academics suggests my experience is not uncommon. Freed from the constraints of any single discourse, academic bloggers—far from lapsing into cynical stemwinders or self-indulgent reflections on the “museum of me,” to borrow Ullman's phrase—more typically end up forging new discoveries about their fields and themselves in a voice that is neither purely personal or fully professionalized.⁷ As the academic blogger who

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writes at La Professora Abstraida notes, blogging redefines one's sense of intellectual community and generally enriches one's professional and personal life: “How would my colleagues know that blogging has replaced cable TV? Or that I now read fewer mystery novels? That blogging has actually increased the amount of time that I spend thinking about my professional life?”⁸ Herein lies a salient point for the academy in the growing popularity of academic blogs. More often than not, it signifies the vitality and relevance of the academic enterprise in everyday life: Young scholars are using their precious free time to learn how to write accessibly and compellingly about specialized knowledge and interests. In this sense, “academic blogging,” as Boynton noted, “represents the fruition, not a betrayal, of the university's ideals.”⁹

As this talk of converging discourses and genres might suggest, blogging is an essential pivot point between the professional roles I inhabit (teacher, writer, scholar) and the persona I cultivate online (part provocateur, part critic, part voice-of-the-unorthodox, non-conformist fans of gospel music). But this convergence is not without its attendant ambivalences and anxieties. One of the main goals of my blog is to model a way of thinking about and responding to gospel music that counters what I have called the “joyful noise” approach to religious music. Joyful-noisers are people who believe all music is equally good and meaningful if the artist is making a joyful noise to the Lord. I don't write solely with these people in mind, but to reach them—and earn their attention long enough to challenge their thinking about the function of religious art— I do often have to write in ways that might seem intellectually suspect or academically undisciplined to those of my academic colleagues uninitiated in the ways of the evangelical mind.

There is also the related problem of my own ambivalence about working in the mixed modes that I described the successful blogger using. Often the entries or

posts that generate the most readable comments threads or the most rewarding reader responses are also the instances in which I am farthest from my scholarly comfort zone—territory where I have to convey not only an intellectual command of my subject (no discomfort there), but also an emotional authenticity that will resonate with that segment of my regular readers who experience the world through the prism of evangelical religious affect. At this point, things start to get more uncomfortable. In these cases, I am unnerved to some extent by the depth of my own psychospiritual connection and response to this artistic tradition. For example, I wrote a while back about “moments of grace” I’d encountered through

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the works of a popular group of gospel performers. With Wordsworth’s spots of time in mind (but not explicitly referenced), I wrote of moments “of understanding or feeling that sweep over us in and through a given artist’s work ... moments that merge intimations of faith and feeling and beauty in a way that gracefully verifies what the apostle so famously described as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Hoped for because felt, unseen but intuited.”¹⁰ Genuine as these sentiments are, I can’t escape the feeling of publishing them at my own professional peril in an academic culture that is often skeptical of certain expressions of affect or sentiment.¹¹

And yet I did publish them, however ambivalently, and continue to do so, despite regular uneasiness. What is to be made of my ambivalent but persistent commitment to blogging? From one point of view, my uncertainty bespeaks the success of my training as an academic; I am on guard against sentimentality lest my own emotional investments erode the intellectual integrity of my writing. From another point of view, such guardedness is not a small part of what perpetuates a tradition of scholarship in the humanities that the wider world of practical affairs increasingly considers remote and irrelevant to the most pressing social, cultural, and political problems of contemporary life.

The longstanding struggle within higher education to make often esoteric ideas, texts, and traditions relevant to a wider community of non-specialists, without sacrificing intellectual integrity, is nothing new. Wallace Stegner provided one of the more evocative dramatizations of this age-old problem in *Crossing to Safety*, a novel about a writer and his literary-critic best friend striving to “leave a mark on the world,” to “contribute ... *in words*.”¹² A hundred and fifty years earlier, Emerson had something similar in mind when he called for “an original relation

to the universe,” brought about by a new breed of active scholars—“Man Thinking”—who would dissolve the false opposition between thought and action.¹³ Understood as an exercise in active thinking or thoughtful action, academic blogging reopens old questions of scholarly identity in new ways, in the ascendant idioms of virtual reality and the digital discourse of our wired world.

In writing about my quasi-secret life as a blogger in this academic journal, I am effectively outing myself as a blogademic to a community of peers whose esteem matters a great deal to me and who may well see me in a different, perhaps even

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less estimable, light because of what I have written online. And while I should say that I believe there is more to be gained than lost from this disclosure, I remain deeply uneasy about the outcome, because the kinds of reactions I am most anxious about will be the ones I probably never know of. The loss of control at this particular site of self-fashioning is profoundly unsettling (you would not have been wrong if you made faintly pathological or epidemiological connections to that word blogademic). I am proud to be a blogger who is also an academic (and vice versa) for some of the same reasons I have written publicly about some of the most intimate and personal, even psychospiritual, sources of my affection for and fascination with gospel music. And I continue to believe that real learning and civilized discourse do not take place without the ability to make oneself vulnerable at times—without, as James Baldwin notes in the quotation with which I began, “risking oneself.”¹⁴

I also find analogs to my uneasiness about blogging in the persona I cultivate as a teacher. In both cases, there are questions of delimiting the professional and the personal: modulating one’s voice to speak in the register that’s appropriate to the content and desired learning outcome; and figuring out how to use my own personal connection with texts, traditions, and ideas in ways that encourage my audience—be they students or blog readers—to initiate the process of discovery for themselves.

This doesn’t mean I always know what I’m talking about. Just as I look back on that first article I published in graduate school and cringe, or think back to remarks I’ve made in this or that class and thought, “dear God, you really said that?” my blog archives can sometimes seem like a parade of infamy, gaffes, and opacity. Will these come back to haunt me? In some sense they already have. I turn red-faced just thinking about the more egregious blunders I’ve made over four

years and probably close to two million words of blogging. Beyond that, I don't know what will be the long-term professional effects of blogging, if any. For the time being, I will continue to blog so long as it continues to serve a complementary function in my eclectic intellectual life and emerging professional identity.

I have no idea how we as academics are to judge blogging, warts and all. I'm uncomfortable with formal evaluation of work like this, even as I am certain that what I do at averyfineline.com exists on a continuum with my more traditional work as a faculty member. The best way to squelch the voiciness that is so essential to the blogger's success is to confine it to a rubric, or to try to distill its importance

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into the often lifeless language of bureaucratic oversight or self-evaluation. Yet I include some of my bloggerly activity in my annual report because I consider it—along with the freelance writing I do about gospel music and evangelical arts—to be one important way of fulfilling my professional commitment to disseminate my specialist knowledge of texts and their cultures to wider communities.

The ambivalences I've touched on are, I think, symptomatic of what Poster has called the virtual "culture of underdetermination."¹⁵ In this culture, the radical democratization of discourse online creates infinite numbers of subjects, voices, and selves whose status is "underdetermined": Adjunct instructor or popular political commentator? Endowed chair of philosophy or the guy who, as Farrell puts it, regurgitates ponderous stodge on his blog? Tenure-track assistant professor or virtual intellectual? Each exists "as a point in a circuit" without "clear paths"—this pathlessness being the best, and worst, thing about academic blogging.¹⁶

The blogademic exemplifies one of the "cultural forms" of virtual reality that, as Poster writes, "do not necessarily improve the position of existing groups as they are currently constituted but change them in unforeseen ways."¹⁷ It's not especially surprising that higher education has yet to comprehend and respond coherently to the comparatively recent changes that new media has introduced. But the academy must find a way to account for new kinds of intellectual labor as organically related to professional identity as academic blogging. Otherwise, it will likely continue to be mistaken for a dirty little secret waiting to be discovered and used against the blogging academic. [nea](http://www.nea.org)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Henry Farrell, “The Blogosphere as a Carnival of Ideas.”
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Boynton, “Attack of the Career-Killing Blogs: When Academics Post Online, Do they Risk their Jobs?”
- ⁴ See averyfinline.com
- ⁵ Anderson, “The Long Tail.”
- ⁶ As of September 2008, averyfinline.com handled an average of 334,173 requests per month—a daily average of just over 11,000—and received an average of 190,749 monthly requests for individual Web pages within the site.
- ⁷ Ullman, “The Museum of Me,” 31.
- ⁸ Dion, “Blogging and Tenure.”
- ⁹ Boynton, “Attack of the Career-Killing Blogs: When Academics Post Online, Do they Risk their Jobs?”
- ¹⁰ averyfinline.com
- ¹¹ For anecdotal examples of how blogs may harm academic careers, see Boynton’s Slate article “The Attack of the Career-Killing Blogs” and the 2005 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* written by the pseudonymous Ivan Trrible, who described how some candidates for a job at an unidentified Midwestern university were torpedoed because their blogs reflected unfavorably on them. These anecdotes notwithstanding, there is little evidence that blogs are having a widespread, adverse effect on academic careers. This leads me to believe that the myth of the persecuted blogademic hounded out of the academy by shortsighted, narrow-minded, or otherwise impercipient academic leadership is largely a projection of deep-seated academic anxieties onto the tenure, promotion, and professional review process.
- ¹² Stegner, *Crossing to Safety*, 11 (emphasis original).
- ¹³ Emerson, “Nature,” 21; “The American Scholar,” 63.
- ¹⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 336.
- ¹⁵ Poster, *What’s the Matter with the Internet?* 1.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 16.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

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