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**Brief History of Blogging**

There are over a million blogs posted every day. Blog is the shortened form of Weblog and was originally a kind of online diary recording the thoughts of an individual. But in the last decade Multi-Authored Blogs (MABs) have developed into income generating businesses. Huffington Post is probably the most famous of these but in fact there are numerous MABs on the market now, all successful businesses harnessing the informal nature, technical immediacy and interactivity of blogging to create new kinds of journalism or to reboot traditional forms for our millennial age.

Blogging is not just writing a more informal article and publishing it online rather than on paper so that someone can troll you. Blogging also encapsulates social media platforms. Twitter openly sells itself as a micro-blogging platform and Tumblr is quite clear that what it hosts are blogs.

What is Facebook, after all, but the single most successful platform in history for blogging? Albeit one aimed, at least initially, at personal material written to share with ones 'friends'. You may say to yourself I know nothing of blogging, as you retweet a meme or respond to something on Facebook. As you do so, not only are you consuming blogs you are, in fact, a blogger yourself.

This fuller sense of what blogging is accounts for a large proportion of our online lives. Indeed increasingly, aside from searching and shopping, blogging is the net. There are 1.2 billion monthly users on Facebook alone and you are probably one of them. Each user is their own publisher, editor and self-publicist. This is an unprecedented event in the history of human culture. We have over a billion people in any given month, all reading the same 'text'; Facebook.

This billion and a bit are not just reading that text they are editing it, promoting it, responding to it, sharing it. The net is not only the biggest text in history, read by the most amount of people at any one time, but since Web 2.0 it is the first text that has as many editors as it does readers. Such a mega-text, which is not only massive but also converts its readers from passive audience to active editors, is all down to the rise of blogging.

In that blogging is about the production of and interaction with texts, it should play a central role in literary studies as a topic, a teaching resource, a mode of assessment and core transferable skill to enhance the employability of our students. While we do mention the net and blogging on our literature courses, and sometimes design courses on Digital Humanities, it is fair to say that we as literature professors spend a disproportionately minuscule amount of time on digital literacy in relation to how much we spend on text literacy; and in relation to how massive and significant the net now is as an interactive textual experiment with immense social, cultural and political implications. This does not seem right. Surely we are missing the most important development in literacy since, well, the rise of literacy.

I wanted to find a way to study blogging, one that emulated it as a form. I didn't want to read blogs as if they were texts, but have students to participate in blogging in a self-conscious and critical way which itself would be a form of reading-as-participating, which is the essence of Web 2.0. So I set up a virtual lab, called BBlogLab, short for Brunel Blogging Laboratory. Then I set my students loose in the lab and recorded what happened. I wasn't sure if my students were the scientists or the lab rats when I did this. To some degree I still don't know.

### **BBlogLab**

BBlogLab is an educational blogging resource designed to investigate and enhance the role of blogging on our courses. Its aim is to support and promote the involvement of our students in creating their own MAB. It was entirely edited and run by Brunel students who commissioned and created content, developed social media strategies to promote the blog, and managed a small budget.

BBlogLab is also a resource for staff and students to reflect on their experience of blogging, providing us with important data as to students' interaction with the web. Finally, BBlogLab is the hub around which blogging education and training will be provided to our students by professionals already working in the field in the coming years.

BBlogLab began with a core of about 5 students over the summer of 2017 led by a second-year Brunel student Fleur Rollet-Manus. This 'A-Team' as it was called were hired by the University to work on BBlogLab, being paid usually for one or two hours per week of work each. Rollet-Manus was already a published and experienced blogger at this point, so she was appointed editor in chief.

Almost immediately it was decided by the team that BBlogLab should not be then name of the Blog itself, and so the team worked together to find a name that reflected their ethos, that hadn't already been used and which had a readily available and cheap URL. The choice of a name, therefore, involved the A-Team in a series of skill-sets such as working together, understanding their vision, and practical skills like choosing a name based on uniqueness, cost and the like.

### **Heymillennials.co.uk**

From their short-list we then took a poll of all those students who had already expressed interest in becoming BBlogLab participants, polling being a well-established format within the blogging world. Again this is a key transferable skill as building and using data-bases is at the heart of blog promotion. The name HeyMillennials was agreed upon at which point the A-Team set about the technical process of acquiring the URL, HeyMillennials.co.uk, paying for it, establishing a WordPress site tied to this URL and so on. Students also worked on logos, visual design, the vision and identity of the blog, and the various categories our blogs would be organized under. Not everyone liked the chosen name, not all participants agreed on the strategies and so on. These disagreements were then part of their experience of a work-place environment where competing points of view have to be accommodated.

During this period I also hired 10 editor/writers for HeyMillennials and 10 sub-editors. Their job was to write content for HeyMillennials and to edit content submitted on a topic they had chosen or were assigned. We had, therefore, a core of around 25 students all being paid to put HeyMillennials together. These editors shared skills and also benefitted from training provided by those with greater experience of the sector. Feedback on their work and their editing was regularly provided.

Over the autumn of 2017 the central editorial team and the wider team of sub-editors were set tasks by the editor in chief, Fleur Rollet-Manus. Fleur had a very strong vision for HeyMillennials structuring it, and designing the web-page based on her experience, in particular with Suitcase magazine. This vision was regularly discussed and sometimes criticized yet at the same time as editor in chief with more experience of blogging than anyone else on the project her vision was ultimately respected by the team. I worked above this team, helping with technical issues, approving funding for equipment, software and subscriptions, helping with any problems between students and so on.

### **Crisis Point**

This first phase of HeyMillennials reached a point by Christmas of 2017 where it was clear the structure established was not working. We lost our editor in chief to Suitcase magazine. I was forced to then take up this role, something that was not intended when I applied for funding. The 20-editors system proved too unwieldy, to do with limitations in terms of JobShop but also students failing to claim money or even do the work they agreed to do. The primary problem however was that editors and students in general were not able to produce regular content. The durational models of higher education, two essays every term of significant length, appeared to stymie the students' ability to think of an idea, write it up in an hour or so, edit it the next day, then submit. Projects were often discussed at length with, more often than not, the article never being submitted.

After a crisis meeting with the A-Team a new editor was appointed, and we changed the hiring model. In 2018 we hired writers, rather than editors, who were paid weekly to write content. Their contract stipulated they would write one 800 word blog every other week. In this way we managed to keep HeyMillennials going until the end of the academic year

publishing 3 pieces a week of consistent high quality relying on a core team of writers paid to write blogs, a model which is actually unsustainable in blogging as an industry but which we were forced to adopt to keep the blog running.

### **Social Media Strategising**

Integral to Blogging is social media strategy. Indeed some see blogging as a means of enhancing their social media profile rather than using social media to promote their writing. Over the 12 months that HeyMillennials was online therefore we had a robust social media presence with students managing Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. The expertise we picked up as a team were then used to inform the social media strategy of our subject areas with the aim of improving recruitment and employability. When English and Creative Writing were given funding to appoint several interns to run their social media strategy, HeyMillennials was an intrinsic part of that strategy and we appointed two paid interns to the Blog at this point.

### **Heymillennials: The Legacy Edition**

BBlogLab led to the development of a professional level online multi-author blog called HeyMillennials which still exists albeit in a dormant state. HeyMillennials published 70 original blogs, amounting to about 400,00 words of content. The blogs covered everything from dating, 0-size models, mental health, blogging, fake news, mindfulness, Black Panther and beyond. The byline of the blog was Blogging for Students by Students and our overall vision was current events and culture written about in an informal style focusing on relevance for students. We believe that probably 40+ students took part, and we accumulated a mailing list of over 100 students who had some active interest in the project.

We also established a successful Facebook page that had many visitors, and vibrant Twitter and Instagram feeds. Students were able to work on a regular basis on these accounts developing core social media strategy skills. Through active participation in running a social media platform to serve a professional blog core skills of a wide variety were picked up by around 20 students.

More widely contributors to HeyMillennials were encourage to use their own social media platforms to promote their work and were provided with training on how to do this from blogging professionals in the form of written content and live events. HeyMillennials hosted several events for Brunel students over the period of a year and we estimate that we reached over 150 students in this way. These events were intensive, lasting several hours, and were participatory, leading to students becoming hired by HeyMillennials or writing material for us. HeyMillennials itself had over 3000 visitors over the period that it ran and nearly 10k views.

The students who worked on and usually for HeyMillennials experienced internships, effectively, on a professionally run MAB. They had job descriptions, we set deadlines for work, and were part of a vibrant network of students all working together to the same end for a period of 12 months. The work that went into setting up and running HeyMillennials also formed the basis of new curricula.

HeyMillennials was embedded in a level 1 module attended aby 120+ students. During the two-term duration of the module Reading Resilience, first year students used HeyMillennials as their source text for understanding blogging and social media on a practical level, many were encouraged to write for the blog, and on a theoretical level, we held many debates on topics like trolling and privacy. They were also able to produce assessments which were pitches for blogs and blogs themselves, many of which were subsequently published.

At the same time a Level 3 module called Violence was tied into HeyMillennials through a formal blog assessment worth 50% of the overall grade. Students were trained in blogging by HeyMillennials staff and many of the blogs they wrote were then published by HeyMillennials once they had been assessed. This module had 45 students meaning that approximately 165 students participated in some form in the project aside from the 40 or so who were actively involved. Considering the relatively small cohort of students we have in English and Creative Writing, this is a substantial impact.

HeyMillennials is currently dormant but it has left a tangible legacy. The social media internships in English and Creative Writing came about, initially, because of the work we

were doing on HeyMillennials. Blogging as creative practice and as a topic of study is now core to the English program in the first year, and an option in the third year. Digital Literacy, as we are calling the general practice of writing about blogging and writing blogs, is now being developed as part of a central digital creative program at Brunel and is seen by many as one solution to issues of recruitment, employability and student experience.

On a personal level I have published numerous pieces of journalism during my period running BBlogLab, and am currently developing a book proposal on social media along with a brace of articles.

BBlogLab has also had tangible impact on colleagues in my subject areas, as evidenced by numerous minuted discussions in formal meetings, the development of the internship program, and changes to curricula. For example, due to the personal tutees system at level 1 being tied to Reading Resilience, all English and Creative Writing colleagues had to oversee pitches and blogs written by our students for HeyMillennials. This component was so successful it is now integrated into the new single honours Creative Practice module in level 1.

### **Overview**

Our initial aim with BBlogLab was an experiential laboratory based around a professionally-run blog that any student could participate in so that they could understand digital literacy by developing their literacy skills through blogging, editing, social media and promotion. On this measure the project was an unqualified success. The aim of our student editors was to make HeyMillennials a vibrant, widely read and monetized blog. On this measure we were simply unable to achieve this.

That said, the various elements that led to HeyMillennials failing to 'go viral' during its 12 month life span were immensely informative and, I feel, the students and I learnt more about blogging thanks to the difficulties HeyMillennials came up against. One of the central problems was that students, even when incentivized, were not willing to put in the small but regular amounts of effort required to make a blog work. The durational and sequential nature of blog work, cut across the norms of working for our students which centre around one or two assessments submitted per term of considerable length and complexity, rather

than one piece every other week, that was short and spontaneous. This has caused me to rethink the nature of my assessments and make them both more frequent and more subject to editorial revision.

One clear drawback for students is that successful blogging is tied into the news agenda, be it political or lifestyle. It is clear that our students do not follow the news agenda, read a newspaper, listen to the news, even follow the news feeds on their social media platforms with any kind of regularity.

These and other limitations mean HeyMillennials will not continue as a student-run, multi-author blog with the tag-line blogging for students by students. However HeyMillennials continues to exist as a wordpress blog and will form the basis for all our blogging and social media activities in the future. In this sense BBlogLab and HeyMillennials have come together at the end of the project. HeyMillennials is now an experiential, practical, semi professional blog on which Brunel students can work in a safe and supportive environment to develop their digital literacy skills. On this measure the project was a complete success. One of the imperatives of a modern university is to prepare students for the work-place. Employability remains a challenge for our students impacting on our TEF ratings. English students in particular do not take a vocational course and do not usually enter into their final career pathway when they leave Brunel. The idea behind BBlogLab was to give students direct experience of professional skills suitable for jobs of the future, as opposed to training them for jobs which, ten years from now, thanks to AI and automation, will be rendered obsolete.

By the same reasoning English Literature and Creative Writing are both concerned with inculcating in our students a profound level of literacy that, arguable, is unmatched by any other academic course. This is, in effect, their USP. In that literacy is undergoing the greatest revolution in its history since the development of the printing press and the rise of mass literacy, it is surely incumbent upon us to educate our students making them the leading experts in this new kind of digital literacy. BBlogLab was a first tentative step towards these dual goals and will continue to inform digital literacy at both a professional and academic level in the years to come.