

# The boundaries of academic blogging

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*Alex Marsh* thinks of himself as a blogger who is an academic, rather than an “academic blogger”. He finds that though there is significant overlap, these two identities are not entirely congruent. An academic blogger may feel constrained to topics only related to his or her academic research, whereas a blogger who is also an academic is free to explore wider fields of discussion.



We live in a world of impact and engagement. Academics are encouraged to embrace social media and communicate in new and different ways to broader audiences. More academics should be getting acquainted with WordPress or Blogger, Typepad, Posterous or Tumblr. The world needs to know what’s happening within the academy. We’ve got interesting ideas and findings to share. And if the world is going to grasp what’s happening then our writing needs to be digestible. The spin-off benefits that this offers for our own teaching and research have been admirably [summarised by Simon Wren-Lewis](#). I must confess, I’m a little less comfortable than I might be with this whole idea. The idea of academics blogging is fine. My issue is more with the idea of “academic blogging”. Where does it begin and end?

I am an academic. In that world I am Professor and the head of one of the five Schools in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at one of Britain’s leading universities. And I am a blogger. In this world I write an individual blog on politics and policy-related issues. The blog is currently ranked in the top 100 UK politics blogs by ebuzzing. Many people arrive and depart my blog without knowing I’m an academic. I don’t hide the fact. It’s there on the About page. But I don’t give it any particular prominence. Similarly, I don’t mention it on my Twitter bio.

Of course, these two identities – academic and blogger – overlap considerably. But they aren’t entirely congruent. And that can set up tensions. My academic research career was largely built on researching and writing about housing markets, regulation and housing policy in England. That is a field in which there is currently plenty of debate, activity and inactivity. It is a policy area that requires rethinking. So there is plenty to write about.

But if I only blogged about housing then my posts would be relatively few and far between. And I rarely report directly on research – either my own or that of others. More frequently I write op-ed commentary. Is that “academic blogging”? And, if I’m honest, sticking to housing would rather defeat the object of setting up the blog in the first place. I wanted a place to talk about whatever was on my mind. So I also blog about closely related issues such as the welfare state and rights, social security and welfare reform, and land use planning. There is plenty to say about the substance of policy in these areas, the processes of its formulation, and the discourses that accompany it. This territory is entirely comfortable, given my research profile. It is congruent with my role in academia. But that probably doesn’t account for half of the posts on this blog.

Some academic bloggers leaven the mix by interspersing their ‘academic’ posts with more personal posts about family, biography or travel. I’m not at all averse to that approach, but it isn’t really my style. So I tend to look in other directions. After all, the blog monster needs regular feeding somehow. So I blog about a range of issues that interest me including macroeconomics, banking reform, industrial policy, transport, public sector restructuring, and the methodology of economics. Only on the last couple of these topics have I ever contributed anything relevant to the academic literature. I’d like to have written more, but c’est la vie.

Of course, like most academics I teach across a broader canvas than I have ever had time to actively research. This gives a range of further resources to draw on when blogging about issues making the headlines. Occasionally I draw explicitly on academic sources, but more often I don’t. Yet, topics like macroeconomics or banking rarely intersects with my academic work. I studied some back in the day, but things have changed out of all recognition since then. Any reading I do now in these fields I do largely for pleasure.

Finally, I post about current political events. These posts are written simply because I'm interested in the topics. Blog posts about rebellious Tory backbenchers, Liberal Democrat differentiation, Labour's deficiencies, the Leveson inquiry, or the travails of the Coalition are written because that's what's in the news and on my mind. While I no doubt bring a certain social scientific sensibility to the topic, that's not really the point. Does this matter? I'm not sure.

For one thing it means the blog does not have as clear an identity as many blogs by academics. The whole thing is probably a little unfocused. But in that respect it reflects its author. Some hardy readers visit the blog regularly, whatever the topic of the most recent post. But, as a consequence of the diversity of content, it tends to attract distinct but overlapping audiences. This emerges from the patterns in the retweets and backlinks.

When I'm writing on non-housing topics is that "academic blogging"? Or just an academic blogging? When I venture further afield do I do so as a professional academic or as an intelligent and reasonably well-informed lay person? If I were not an academic then as a political blogger I could roam free. I could write about whatever took my fancy. The blog would stand or fall by the quality of the writing and insight on offer. I toyed with setting up a blog anonymously to give myself that freedom. But I decided against it. If I was going to say it then I was going to acknowledge that it was me that said it.

Yet, that means that in practice my freedom is constrained. It comes into tension with the academic professional identity. Your academic title brings with it the expectation that your comments are informed by some knowledge of relevant literatures and debates. There is, at the very least, a professional obligation not to hold forth on topics of which you are largely ignorant. You can't simply shoot from the hip about whatever winds you up. I never blog on topics about which I know next to nothing. Sometimes topics arise that I'd like to discuss, but I don't feel there's much chance that I would do them justice. In fact, there's a good chance I'd offer up something execrably simplistic. So I don't attempt it.

As it is, I'm conscious that I often stray into territory where those with the relevant academic specialism would most likely deny me any standing in the discussion. Not that I mind hugely. I think of myself as a blogger who is an academic, rather than an "academic blogger". That distinction just about allows me to reconcile the two separate but overlapping identities to my own satisfaction. Whether it is a distinction that is meaningful to anyone else is a separate question.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

#### **About the author:**

**Alex Marsh** is Professor of Public Policy at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol. He teaches on the Masters in Public Policy in the areas of the economics of public policy, public management and organisations. His research is primarily in the field of housing policy, regulation and housing markets in England. Much of his work has focused on social and private renting. He is a former Managing Editor of the journal *Housing Studies*. Between 2006-2010 he was a Visiting Academic Consultant to the Public Law Team at the Law Commission, where he contributed to consultation papers on the regulation of private renting and remedies against public bodies. He is currently continuing his work on regulation in the private rented sector and undertaking work on housing market decision-making from the perspective of behavioural economics. His blog can be found at [www.alexarchives.org](http://www.alexarchives.org)

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