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# Blogging and Tweeting in an Age of Austerity

By Fredrik Gustafsson

I've always been an early adopter when it comes to the online world. I had my own web page sometime in the mid to late 1990s and I opened a Twitter account in 2007. Back then hardly anybody else had one so I gave up after just one tweet ("not doing much. fooling around with my computer, listening to leonard cohen"). But since 2009 I'm back, [tweeting about film](#). I of course began blogging too but uncustomarily late, not until 2005, but I've kept on blogging ever since. Occasionally I've had three or four differently themed blogs simultaneously but for now [my focus is on film](#). Now I'm also a founding editor of *Frames Cinema Journal*, with its inaugural issue devoted to digital film and moving image studies. This feels like a logical progression. Below, I'd like to use my experiences in order to discuss the virtues of blogging, tweeting and online publishing. I'd also like to highlight some threats concerning the well-being of the Internet.

In October 2009, Ian Sample wrote a review in the Guardian of Malcolm Gladwell's latest book *What the Dog Saw*. Towards the end of the, positive, review Sample wrote:

There is nothing new in this new book, but that is clear from the start. What is less clear is that all the pieces are available free of charge from Gladwell's own website. If you like, you can go there and read the original New Yorker articles, complete with beautiful layouts and cartoons. You can even print them out and staple them together using an industrial stapler from the stationery cupboard at work. A trial run suggests that this could occupy an idle lunchtime.

Gladwell's publisher no doubt paid a lot of money to repackage his free stories and sell them on for a tidy profit. It is a scenario that has the makings of a Gladwellian dilemma. Why buy the book if the content is free? And what does that say about me? Is the feeling of being mugged by the publisher trumped by the virtue of convenience. ([1](#))

Why read it in book form, Sample asked, when it is already available freely online. Why indeed?

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There has long been a debate as to whether the Internet is good enough for the publication of serious scholarly research. Should we not devote ourselves to non-virtual books and journals instead, and encourage our students to stay offline and only hang out in real libraries? I've always had problems with that approach, and with the dichotomy between words printed on paper and digital words. In the old days of the public Internet, say the early 1990s, this might have been an understandable, even defensible, stand. Nowadays it could be argued that the Internet is just as valid as the library and that by not using it scholars and students are in fact missing out on important readings.

For one thing, as Sample pointed out, the very same items that are available on paper might be available online. Besides [Gladwell](#), many writers and scholars have their own websites, where most, or all, of their writing is freely available, such as [Jonathan Rosenbaum](#). But there is also the case of scholars who write exclusively for the web, and whose material will only be available online, for example, those giants of cinema studies, [David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson](#). They blog extensively and film scholars who don't read their blog miss out on an extraordinary wealth of knowledge, analysis and reflexion. But also, as in the model that Sample mentions above, Bordwell and Thompson have experimented with allowing their readers to access material online, for free, that is also being published and sold, expensively, in the traditional book format. (2)

The Bordwell and Thompson example leads us to the second invaluable example of the importance to film studies of open access, online publishing, namely blogging. Film blogs can serve three important purposes:

1 - As with Bordwell/Thompson's blog, they provide important historical and theoretical information and context, much as any offline essay, book or article.

2 - They provide a channel, an outlet, for the many critics and writers, underemployed or let go from their regular jobs in print media, where downsizing is the name of the game.

3 - They allow readers to come up close and personal with the critics and scholars in a way that was previously not all that easy or even possible.

Essential in this respect is [Dave Kehr's blog](#). Kehr is a leading critic/historian and his blog has some 10 000 regular visitors. What Kehr does it not so much write on the blog himself, but rather he provides a free forum for film folk. Among those that keep up a daily conversation at his blog are some of the world's most distinguished writers, critics, filmmakers, scholars and film historians, as well as distributors. Kehr

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calls his blog “reports from the lost continent of cinephilia”, and it is partly a waterhole for film enthusiasts, but, with the high standard of the discussions and the collective knowledge, you might get more up-to-date insights into the current trends in film studies than anywhere else.

So Kehr’s blog is different from Bordwell/Thompson’s, because theirs is ‘closed’, not open for comments or interaction. It is only the masters’ voice that gets heard. So, in their two different ways, these two blogs show two different ways of using the form. One, Bordwell and Thompson’s, in writing very long and complex texts, with no interaction. The other, Kehr’s, in primarily providing a place for debates among his readers/commentators. In a way Bordwell/Thompson’s blog use old media principles in a new media setting, and is therefore also an example of how distinctions between new and old media are often narrow-minded and simplistic.

A third version of film studies blogging is my [own](#). My entries are not as lengthy and academic as Bordwell’s or Thompson’s, and there’s no on-going discussion between readers as at Kehr’s, just the occasional contribution from a commenter. I blog for three reasons. Because I love to write, because I want to contribute to evolving research into film history and because it is a good way of networking and acquiring scholarly visibility. I have readers all over the world, and the number of daily visitors is constantly growing. I always feel excited when I see that somebody faraway in the world has read something of mine or when I receive the occasional message from someone asking for advice, or thanking me for having written about something that they had been wondering about. It makes writing on the blog worthwhile. It also gives me a way of telling the world about my research, so if there is somebody in, say, Pakistan who is interested in the same things as I am, we can meet this way, and share ideas and insights.

But the blog is one of three parts of my online presence. As I mentioned I also use [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), all using the same name (Fredrik on Film) and the same profile photo (a still from Antonioni’s *L’elisse* (1962)), to emphasise that they are related. On these platforms there’s considerably more interaction with my readers, and I use both places to link to my own blog post but also to other blogs, reviews or essays, or YouTube-clips. This is also a place where I can directly engage with other tweeters, be they students, critics, academics or just about anybody who’s enthusiastic about films. I get more intellectual stimulus through this channel than from my blog, which is more a case of me putting my ideas out there (and hopefully providing intellectual stimulus for somebody else).

I have more followers on Twitter than on Facebook and that’s what I use the most. The benefits of Twitter are that it is more direct, easier to use

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and more immediately accessible to the wider world. But they all work well together. For example, not only do I link to my latest blog posts on Twitter, a box on my blog has my latest tweets as well, so they both generate traffic for each other.

So far so exciting. But I, and others, see some dangers ahead, for the kinds of blogging I describe above, as well as for open access in general, and even the Internet. The threats could be divided in to three categories: app-ification, costs and censorship.

With smartphones before and tablet computers now leading the way, the uses of application software, apps, for any kind of activity you might want to indulge in on the internet is increasing. These apps will change the web as we now know it, shrink it, and perhaps make it a gated community. Web browsers such as IE, Firefox or Safari give us almost unlimited access to the Internet but apps do not. They will just take you to one specific location on the Internet. Instead of freely moving around, you will just go to the one place that you want, be it a newspaper or a online store, or a game. But those who haven't got an app for their web presence, such as a little store or a film blogger, might very well lose out, in that less people will find them. With people no longer freely browsing, or even googling, as much, it is likely there will be less spontaneity and freedom in our online lives.

Another problem is the costs involved with having an on-line presence. It should be said that open access and open software, what might be called copyleft, as opposed to copyright, is never free, or at least not without costs. As the old saying goes, there's no such thing as a free lunch. In 2009 Chris Anderson came out with a book called *Free*, which was immediately criticised. The argument was that if he was ahead of the game with his previous book *The Long Tail* (from 2006), with *Free* he was half a step behind, that things were already becoming less free. One potential problem is that using open software might actually lead to *greater* costs for a company than if they had bought for example Microsoft's products. This is partly because the company must still have people to create and maintain the software, and this might be more costly than relying on the structure and support provided by Microsoft. For a film blogger there are also costs involved of course, of both time and money, especially if you want your blog to look good. But for individuals, unless you're a famous fashion blogger, it is hard to live on just blogging. In that sense blogging is still an amateur thing, for volunteers. How long they (we) will keep it up remains to be seen.

And then there is the third threat, censorship. These come in different shapes and forms. Obviously from governments and states, with China leading the way with their great firewall. Under the recent events in the

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Middle East, words such as Egypt, Tunisia and Jasmine have disappeared from the web in China in different ways, and are not searchable. This of course affects a film blogger who wants to write about Tunisian cinema. Writing about films about Tibet or the Dalai Lama, to take another example, is also difficult to do under China's censorship rules. But many other governments censor the web, or try to control it. There's also censorship on company levels with for example Apple's pre-approved apps, where only decent ones are allowed. At the moment it feels like censorship and restrictions are growing, all over the world.

So whether the internet will remain free and open in the future is very much an open question. But we should enjoy it while it lasts.

(The theme of this issue is digital film studies but I thought I link to something I recently wrote, about what we lost as we switch from analog to digital: <http://fredrikonfilm.blogspot.se/2012/05/passing-of-polyester.html> )

#### **Endnotes:**

(1) I copied and pasted this from the online version of the article <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/oct/17/what-the-dog-saw-gladwell-review?INTCMP=SRCH> which I originally read in the paper version. Last accessed 2012-06-07

(2) Don't forget to read Kristin Thompson's [essay in this issue](#) on her own on- and offline publishing experiences.

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