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Blogs are becoming an increasingly popular way for scholars—including several members of the Williams community—to share their work and insight with a wide audience. But sometimes the publicity these Web journals generate can backfire.

By Cathleen McCarthy

At a recent luncheon at Princeton, Marc Lynch, surrounded by former diplomats and some of the most distinguished scholars in his field, was surprised to hear himself introduced by Islam historian Michael Cook not only as the author of *Voices of the New Arab Public* and associate professor at Williams, but also as the blogger Abu Aardvark.

“And Bernard Lewis nodded along,” Lynch reported in his blog the next day, referring to the Princeton professor emeritus and well-known Middle East scholar. “This blogging thing really might be getting out of hand.”

Venerated scholars like Cook and Lewis may not be writing their own online commentaries yet, but they are obviously reading them. Abu Aardvark appeals not only to scholars of the Middle East but also to anyone attempt-

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mainstream bloggers attract. “There’s quantity and then there’s quality,” he says. “I have a very high-quality readership. By that, I mean a substantial percentage of other academics, journalists, editors, policy makers—which means more to me in some ways. It allows me to reach people who make a difference.”

Lynch attracts, for example, readers in the U.S. state and defense departments and in military intelligence. “It can be a little frightening sometimes,” he says. “The nature of blogging is shifting. It started as a hobby, and now it’s become a vital part of my professional output. Blogging is the means of reaching a large audience, and that creates its own demands. Walking away now would actually have an impact.”

From the beginning, Abu Aardvark has served as an extension of the research Lynch was doing on a daily basis. But balancing the blog, which he still enjoys but now considers “a professional obligation,” with “a heavy teaching load, active research and a family” has required adjustments he never considered when he launched the site in 2002.

At the time, Abu Aardvark was not only a catchy title, it was a pseudonym. Like many academic bloggers, Lynch initially opted to use an alias in order to keep his online opinions separate from his teaching career. Then in May 2005, he was invited to engage in an online debate with libertarian-conservative blogger Daniel Drezner ’90, via Kevin Drum’s popular blog at *The Washington Monthly*. Lynch decided to come out of the blogger closet.

That decision opened doors. As the Princeton gathering reflects, Lynch’s blog is now considered part of his accomplishments and reputation. His *Voices of the New Arab Public* (Columbia University Press, 2005) has become an academic best seller. “The blog definitely helped a lot,” Lynch

says. “The book got a lot of publicity among bloggers who read it and wrote about it.”

When Sam Crane, a professor of political science at Williams, began contemplating a blog, Lynch urged him to do it. A specialist in East Asia politics and international relations, Crane launched Useless Tree (uselesstree.typepad.com) in June 2005 and now gets about 100 visits per day. His blog grew out of his interest in ancient Chinese philosophy—particularly Confucianism and Taoism—which he began teaching three years ago. Like Lynch, Crane starts every day with a scan of international news—in his case, anything affecting China. But Crane uses Useless Tree to ponder philosophical questions more than political ones, such as: What would Confucius think of China’s growing nouveau riche?

Crane is working on a book about bringing ancient Chinese philosophy into everyday conversations and says blogging keeps him connected daily to many texts. “The central theme



ing to understand a culture dramatically affecting the rest of the world.

For the last five years, Lynch has scanned the Arab press, translating reports to English and offering a twice-daily online analysis of Arab media, culture and public opinion and of American public diplomacy in the Middle East. Abu Aardvark (abuaardvark.typepad.com) attracts 500 to 2,000 readers per day but spikes whenever events in the Middle East top the news. During the peak of the conflict in Lebanon last summer, Lynch’s blog attracted nearly 5,000 readers daily. That number jumps to 10,000 or even 20,000 when a post gets a link from high-traffic bloggers like Kevin Drum of *The Washington Monthly* or Matthew Yglesias of *The American Prospect*, the sort of “center-left” political writers who favor Lynch’s point of view.

Yet Lynch doesn’t see himself competing for the audiences these

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of Confucius is living a good life and acting in a moral or ethical way. It's about the importance of attending first to one's closest relations before building the roles at work and in the world," Crane says. "That's a hard thing to do. I'm closer to a Taoist philosophy myself, but I like thinking through Confucius kinds of questions and problems."

Lynch says he would think twice before offering junior faculty the advice he gave Crane. "If you have enemies, a long blog history becomes a treasure trove of things people can use against you," he says. "A blog increases your visibility and can create jealousy and resentment."

Publicity from blogging can backfire on an academic career, as both Drezner and University of Michigan professor Juan Cole recently discovered. Last summer, Cole was passed over for a Yale chair after being called a "notorious anti-Israel academic" in *The Wall Street Journal* and criticized in other high-profile media. Just a few months earlier, Drezner was denied tenure at the University of Chicago, a move widely attributed to his blog.

Drezner quickly landed on his feet, announcing online three weeks later that he had accepted a tenured position at Tufts University. He is now associate professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. "In terms of my job at the University of Chicago, my overall take is that the blog did not matter as much as the media coverage suggested," Drezner says. "But it also probably mattered more than some members of the tenure committee were saying."

For Tufts, a professional public policy school, Drezner's fame—"or notoriety, however you want to look at it," he quips—was undoubtedly regarded as a plus. "It's not like they hired me because of the blog, but I think it's safe to say they saw it as a positive rather than a negative."

Drezner was reading political blogs long before he started his own. "Then 9/11 happened," he says. "People became much more concerned about foreign policy and international relations. I thought I could blog about those things as someone who had been trained to study them. I was already writing op-eds on this stuff, but no one wanted to publish them."

Before he launched his blog on the first anniversary of 9/11, Drezner could not get the op-ed editor at the *Chicago Tribune* to return his e-mails. A few months later, he was being solicited by editors of *The New Republic*, where he now writes a column, and *The New York Times*, where he contributes book reviews. His blog (danieldrezner.com) logs some 4,000 readers a day, and a

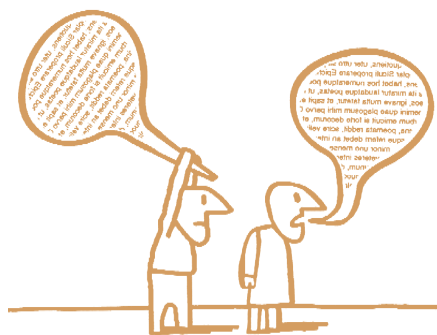
single post can elicit 50 comments. A major benefit of blogging, he says, is "you get a much larger megaphone if you want to be a public intellectual. It's another way in which to make your name in the field."

Nevertheless, Drezner adds, "Blogs are still looked at by academics the same way they looked at TV in the '50s: as a really tawdry medium we don't talk about in polite company but everybody reads anyway. In 10 or 15 years, it might be that blogs are considered something else academics do. You're already seeing more senior academics deciding to blog. Whole departments are devoted to them."

Lynch, Drezner and Crane all try to keep their blogs separate from their teaching. None but Drezner brings it up in class, and he did so only after it became obvious his Tufts students read the blog. "You know the old *Seinfeld* episode about worlds colliding? That happened with me as blogger and me as professor," Drezner jokes. "Now I open my classes saying, 'By the way, you might know I have a blog. You certainly don't need to read it, and I certainly don't expect you to read it back to me in this class.' That pretty much clears things up."

Drezner now seems poised to become an expert on academic blogging. Due out soon is the book *The Political Promise of Blogging* (University of Michigan Press), which he co-edited with fellow blogger Henry Farrell, an assistant professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University. As for books in his field, Drezner had one on international relations when he began blogging. He co-edited another in 2003 and has two more coming out: *All Politics is Global* (Princeton University Press) and *U.S. Trade Strategy* (Council on Foreign Relations).

How does he find time for all this? It's a question successful academic



bloggers frequently hear. The perception of blogging as a time waster was at the heart of the debate over Drezner's tenure decision. "As academics, we take words very seriously," Drezner says. "There is a tendency by those who publish only scholarly work—which is a perfectly valid way to proceed—to assume any other form of writing takes the same amount of time. And that's not true. The time it takes me to write an article for the *American Journal of Political Science* is much greater than the time it takes to write a really long blog post—yet both can involve the same amount of words."

It's not unusual, after all, for a blog post to involve five paragraphs snipped from a newspaper article and only one written by the blogger. "An interesting irony is that blogs make a great deal of being different from mainstream media, but at the point we're at now, good bloggers function very similarly to newspaper editors," Drezner points out. "They decide which stories they think are important and which aren't."

Lynch says that for many of his online readers, he serves as a highly sophisti-

cated clipping service and even a translator. One reason he can fit blogging into his schedule is that analysis of Arab media was already part of his daily routine. He relies on his own blog archives for academic research, and he's not the only one.

"Arabic search engines are extremely poor," Lynch says. "If it's in the newspaper today, it might not be there three days from now. But I include links to all the articles I reference so they're cached and I can pull them up later."

He recently started adding these links on his blog as a sidebar with brief comments. "I've been told by many fellow academics and government people that they find this incredibly useful. They don't have time to troll through a dozen newspapers—and they don't have to because they trust my judgment. It's become a crib sheet for them."

As masters of the concise, conversational tone blogs require, both Lynch and Drezner attract readers with their writing as well. "One of the most useful classes I ever took in college was Jim Shepard's fiction writing class," Drezner says, referring to the J. Leland Miller Professor of American History, Literature and Eloquence at Williams. "Jim is a Raymond Carver disciple, and Carver's principle is no useless words or punctuation marks. That skill applies to blogging as well as scholarly writing:

WELCOME TO THE BLOGOSPHERE...

Just in case your trusty *Webster's* is a bit out of date, a "blog" is a Web journal. Typically, the creator of a blog (in cyber-argot, the blogger) offers online commentary on his or her favorite topic. Many blogs are devoted to politics, food, music, celebrity gossip and travel, but the range of subject matter is virtually unlimited.

Most blogs are open-ended, rather like diaries that build from one day's experiences and thoughts to the next, although the entries appear in the reverse of their order of composition, with the newest ones first. Many blogs integrate images with text together with links to other sites on the Web. Reader responses are often welcomed, too.

The etymology of blog? The word is the result of a conversational contraction of "Web log."

Get to the point."

There is an irreverence to both Drezner's and Lynch's blogs that makes even the most grave subject matter approachable—even, at times, fun. In a recent post, Lynch reported on two videos of Ayman al-Zawahiri, an al-Qaida leader and former head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which he accessed and translated before they became public. Lynch compared al-Zawahiri's performance to "Eminem's rap battles at the end of *8 Mile*, with Zawahiri going directly after Bush's perceived strengths (the war on terror,

Iraq) with what is at least meant to be devastating mockery."

"I think my blog is funny a lot of the time," Lynch says. "So is Dan's—and that may make us seem at times as if we're not serious scholars. On the other hand, if your blog reveals you to have deep, intimate knowledge of a subject, a sharp mind and good writing skills, it will probably count for you. Before I started my blog, I had a good reputation in political science and Middle Eastern studies. Now I am much better known—and it's not just having four years more experience under my belt. I believe the Internet and blogs, in a very real way, are where it's at now in public debate." ■

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