

My So-Called Digital Life:
Reflections on Building an Online Presence

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Picking the topic for my digital humanities project was circuitous even by my occupational standards. Originally I had intended to take many of the WPA era photo negatives that I had scanned over the last two years and created an interactive timeline highlighting the excavations, the workers, and the eventual exhibits. After the initial planning stages of that project I was told that the museum would be losing our current registrar. Since she had been the one to grant me permission to use the images online for my blogposts I became concerned about what a new registrar might wish to in accordance with the ideas of the museum's director. This comes as not only a blow to my current work, but could potentially have ramifications beyond that.

While the head of the vertebrate paleontology portion of the museum and the current registrar are both huge proponents of open access culture, the people at the top are stuck in draconian systems of paying for images which, in the case of WPA projects, actually belong to the public in the first place. The images I requested to use were digital images that I had created during my work there and would continue to exist only as a box of photo negatives had I not spent the 14 months sitting at a laptop and scanner. Not that this should come as any surprise from an institution that boasts over 10 million objects and only employs one registrar and no archivists.

That being the case I have decided to work on something that may have a longer lasting digital presence and can serve as proof of theory for a later project. I have spent the last several weeks updating and renovating my personal website from a simple blog interface into a more proper .com presence. This seems like the perfect opportunity to outline not only how I created the blogspace to begin with but to highlight some of the improvements, innovations, and other useful updates within the Wordpress platform. I will also share how my digital presence has

evolved over time. Hopefully this can serve as a quick starter manual for anyone wishing to do the same.

My first foray into sharing my enlightened and clever thoughts with the world online began in January 2011. It was actually at the behest of a college friend who had started his own men's style blog and thought it should be something I should try. He had more familiarity with coding than I and built his original platform using Wordpress. At the time, and to a large degree still, prefer the what-you-see-is-what-you-get platforms so my first blog platform was built under Google's blogspot, blogger.com.

I was midway through a Master's Thesis in early 2011 and I was deep into the early years of the National Zoo. I was (and honestly, still am) known for posting the more interesting anecdotes of my research on Facebook. If a few days went by without a post about the zoo or one of the director's expeditions a friend would invariably ask about it. With that context I began the Platypus and the Dodo blog to cover all things natural history related. The logic was a Platypus should not exist and does, while the Dodo should exist and does not. My posts would feature some aspect of the animal kingdom and I would either build around my experiences with or knowledge of the subject. The only requirement I had of the platform was it allowed to share images.

I tried to post regularly and found myself spending most of each post apologizing for not posting regularly. I also tried to limit myself to only writing about wildlife. I started a Platypus and Dodo facebook page so I could link my posts to facebook in an easy to share interface as well as have a stable place to share wildlife conservation news that would not get buried in the hundreds of personal posts of my own page. In June of 2011 I joined Twitter. Initially it was to follow Stephen Fry but I quickly found myself linked to an incredibly diverse group of people

ranging from comic book and wildlife artists to paleontologist and museum curators. Not only were they posting fascinating things, but they were reading some of the things that I was posting. For me, this was the point when I knew I had to up my digital game and really structure my online presence.

The Platypus and the Dodo was self-limited to the topic expressed in the title. This was a wildlife interests blog and I did not want it to get bogged down in random posts about other things. This decision left no outlet for the hundreds of other things that I thought about. In June 2012 I started a catch all blogsite, again on blogger, called Life's Marginalia. The title was broad enough to serve purposes outside of the wonderful world of nature. The first two years consisted of biographical sketches of myself, literary and archaeological heroes, and longer answers to social media quizzes such as "books that inspire."

In May 2013 I began another blog called Paleo Porch where I would post all things related to my paleontological outreach projects and any interesting paleontology related news. More than just a place to think and share, Paleo Porch was a way to market my first attempt with crowdfunding. My plan was to build a collection of resin cast replicas of various paleontological pieces such as dinosaur claws and teeth and some larger more iconic extinct mammal pieces. My first attempt with kickstarter did not get off the ground.

After building the campaign Kickstarter corporate emailed to let me know that was not the kind of thing they did. Too bad I wasn't trying to fund a musical album, that would be okay. So I turned to a new alternate site for crowdfunding called Indiegogo. This works exactly like kickstarter only there are no limitations on the projects. The field has since expanded again to include sites like GoFundMe which can host seemingly limitless options. Most of the projects I

have seen are built around paying for medical care although I have seen some people asking for others to help pay off their student debt.

One of the things that aided the success of my crowdfunding campaign was being able to link to the PaleoPorch blog for updates on the project and the outreach that I was doing with it. This included pictures and stories as the purchases objects arrived and then longer posts and more photos from the Paleo Porch Mini Mobile Museum in action at schools and private groups in city parks. It provided a platform for transparency of what had been done with other people's money. It has also served well when people ask how things are going with the project and I can send them a link to the groups and talks.

As I started developing Paleo Porch more for public outreach I started to think about business cards, car magnets, and other means of branding the product. This meant putting an email and website address into the public sphere. I knew I did not want to have my personal email handed out everywhere and I felt more than a little self-conscious about having a "website" that ended with ".blogspot.com" instead of just ".com." The latter may not seem like much difference but the former indicates that you are using a free site and it is mainly a blog and not a proper site. I did not want to go into physical public spaces half baked, which was something I had not considered at all when I began working in the digital public sphere.

If I had a proper .com that site could provide any information to people wishing to book Paleo Porch for a show and provide a method of contact through the site itself and not through some third party email. The first business cards I had printed included a gmail address which never received any emails. Most of the contact with interested parties came through social media and more than one event was scheduled and planned through facebook.

I spent the summer of 2014 talking to a web designer friend about the benefits and other pros and cons of running my own site. Since he has worked designing the new sites for NASA and the USGS I trusted his opinion. These conversations lasted months and I continued to go back and forth on where to host a domain and even what platform I would use to create and actually organize site content. I knew I wanted to do it but I was completely lost at where to start and how to get the ball rolling.

Fortuitously, that same summer the University of Oklahoma unveiled their OU Create suite as an experimental platform for students to create digital projects within university hosted servers. I had no idea what all it was capable of, but I knew that it was something I wanted to try so I was one of the earliest claimants for my create.ou.edu account even though I still had no idea what I wanted my digital space to look like, and I was completely unsure that anything I had done in blogger would transfer easily into any new domain. Early that summer I had attempted to work again with with wordpress but found that while transferring my old blogger posts all of the multimedia was lost.

The Fall of 2014 was my most dedicating blogging season. Having finished my thesis work I began taking Art History courses to augment my studies in early American history of science. From the very first class I would take my notes and compile them into a post which focused on some specific topic of American art. This proved for me the best way to study for the course. Not only could I see my notes, but with the blog I was able to include the artwork that we had talked about and have them all in a single place. The course met once a week on Tuesday nights and I would take the time in the following day or two to transcribe my notes and scour the internet to find some version of the paintings we had talked about. Since this was neither living

nor extinct wildlife these posts went under Life's Marginalia's and were so popular with my professor that he sent the link out to the class to serve as a study guide for the course final.

January 2015 found me as a teaching assistant for a co-listed digital humanities course. The course had two professors, one from the History of Science and the other from Geography. As we spent weeks talking about the function and abilities of digital humanities theory and projects we worked with the students to help them create their own web spaces through the Create.Ou.edu suite and help with some of the libraries digital initiatives. I also took advantage of the time to work on my own.

Working through OU Create's Installatron suite I carved out yet another slice of the internet this time with a proper .com suffice and kept the shortest and easiest to remember title from the others: PaleoPorch.com. The options through Create are seemingly infinite, especially when you only know what 3 of them actually do. I was loosely familiar with Drupal from talking with my friend about web developing for the previous 6 months, but I was still unsure that it was what I needed. After a final analysis of what I wanted my site to do and what I was capable of making it do, my friend convinced me that Drupal would be there to learn later but I could get the same mileage with an easier term of use with standard wordpress.

I wasn't sold on wordpress since the last time I tried to compile everything it ate my multimedia which is an enormous meal since 98% of my posts are bits of multimedia. I use movies, cartoons, and images as analogy, metaphor, and tools to help me remember the point I was trying to make, so having all those in one place was essential. I spent the better part of January working on the site which means I would Google how to do something and watch a youtube video tutorial and copy and paste entire sections of code to embed things.

One of the best innovations I found working in the new wordpress was a transfer and merge plugin. Instead of manually coding what I needed to import from existing blogs the plugin allowed me to copy the URL to my existing blogs and it imported the entire contents of every blog post into my new domain. This included all the multimedia, all the hotlinks, and even most of the tags. The tags were the only mishap as the crossover from blogger to wordpress the tags went from actual “tags” to larger “categories.” This was much easier to rectify than losing all of the post images and videos so within a few minutes of importing my digital collection of thoughts that had once been spread across the internet was now home under a single domain an easily separated and searchable based on keyword or tags and categories.

In February 2015 I began using my blog for notes and book reviews in a similar template that I had used for the art course notes. This coincided with a directed reading course that covered trade and collecting networks and early British exploration. The online format was an excellent way to ensure that I could not only reference text and images but also any prior works which revealed similar themes. Again, the fact that these reviews were searchable for me made drawing parallels between works much easier.

The multimedia aspect of blog reviews works for me quite well. Many times when I am researching or reading a particular work a certain song or video clip will spring to mind and I can quickly add that to my discussion of the book not only to illustrate some idea I have, but to help me remember more of the context by attaching new information to seemingly unrelated ideas that I already have.

My work on the blog continued mostly at pace through 2015. As my directed reading course wrapped up I had more time to devote to writing about paleontological things as well as other things I was working on. I was able to share my work digitizing the WPA negatives

through a blog post which has had the most user comments. Other people have shared interest in the process and I hope that my work encourages them to undertake or oversee such projects at their own university. They have also directed me to similar areas of research that I will be able to use in the future. Something as simple as a comment that says: “Oh, I’ve seen similar stuff at UCLA,” allows me to at that as a potential archive to consult when compiling all the WPA paleontology projects I can find.

Most recently, I had reviewed a trailer for a movie about cave paintings in Spain. The movie has yet to be released in the US, but shows promise for what I work on as paleontology in popular culture. While I was working on it one of our Post-Doctoral researchers in the library asked if there was a way to subscribe to my blog so he could keep up with what I was doing after he left Norman. I had to tell him there was not, and I had never thought about people wanting to subscribe since most people I know get it through facebook. Since he did not use facebook or twitter I decided to look into adding the subscription option for my blog.

As I started looking through plugins and embed codes for automated emails when I publish a post I looked at my page and began thinking it needed to look less like a simple blog and more like a proper page where people could navigate through more than a scrolling list of blog posts. It needed to be something that represented my breadth of interests and depth of field. I started googling how to _____ in wordpress again, ranging from creating a static page, arranging pages on the menu bar and creating photo galleries and slideshows.

As I began work on the backside of Wordpress I was prompted to update many of the functions which I hadn’t done since I originally built the site. Once the updates were completed I realized that many of the things that I had to code and embed when I first put the site together

were no available as site plugins and where much more user friends than they had been a year ago.

It was a simple task of creating new pages, setting one to be the static home page with chosen blog posts displayed at the top and a quick and easy photo slideshow plugin embedded at the bottom. The original home page was re-christened for the blog specifically and I had to indicate that this was where mu new posts would be published. As I created new pages I experimented with page hierarchy and layout. Wordpress could now embed entire photo albums within a page as media and another simple plug-in allows visitors to explore the album in a more linear fashion after choosing a place to start from the main album.

I have pages dedicated to both my public facebook pages and my twitter specifically. This allows me to share things from facebook with people who are not actually on facebook. One of the things I wanted to have on my home page was a twitter scroll bar which would allow my home page to be both static and dynamic. Embedding the twitter scroll onto the site was simple, however it was in the same place on every single page of the website. This was not what I had envisioned nor what I wanted.

A few searches lager and I discovered the plugin “WidgetLogic” which I have to say is one of the best plugins available if you utilize widget areas on your web page. Widget logic lets you instruct the widgets where to display and where to remain hidden. The code is written on top of the widget and instead of having to code ever page individually to show or hide the twitter scroll bar I was able to build the twitter scroll bar into the main page only and not have it show up anywhere else on the site.

Multimedia options have improved greatly since my last site maintenance. With a youtube plugin and instructions on finding my Youtube channel’s API number I was able to

create a page with my uploaded youtube videos on it as they are on my public channel. The instructions for finding the API number were easy to follow and once it was copied and pasted in to the plugin my videos show up in my “Youtube” page. The most recent video is at the top and the other videos are displayed in a gallery below. It is easier to find my own videos through my website now than it is to go through my channel on Youtube.

The final improvement with Wordpress media options is one I have been looking for since I began thinking about my digital portfolio: hosting PDFs. Now, papers that I have written, or any PDF can be uploaded to a page just like any other media. The papers are stored within Wordpress just like photos or video and are hard-linked to their upload site. The names of the papers can be the default link, or you can change them on the page. Through this system I was able to post university papers, take home tests, and other essays in rough and finished form on my webpage as PDF links. This is much easier for me to navigate than one of the three external harddrives I have of old coursework and notes. The stable online links make it easier for me to share the files as well since they are not full PDF files themselves but a simple web address.

My online presence has continually evolved from a social presence to a more adequate digital portfolio of my work, research, and interests. Through my online world I can access and compare things I have done over the past decade and see where my thoughts have changed and other areas where I have been thinking about the same problems and ideas for years. The ease of sharing, the ability to have conversations with like-minded individuals around the world, and a place to serve as an archive for my own work has been the greatest benefit of creating and curating a digital life.

Going forward I hope to continue to share my work online whether blog or social media as I have found that it garners more supporters and pleasant conversations than I am able to

sustain with those that I see face to face. I also hope that working through this issues of building a working website will allow me to fully integrate the Pacific Railroad Surveys into a webpage that can be utilized by teachers and students across the globe. Having the surveys digitized is a small step, but building a single page where the books can be explored and cataloged piecemeal by subject, geography, or people should allow a deeper experience with the works. If this model serves well that will be part of my dissertation work and the outcome there can serve as a model for other such surveys to be expanded and built online with rigorous academic commentary for those that need it, and an easy way to get to the images and the results of the surveys for those needing it for a high school or university intro history project.