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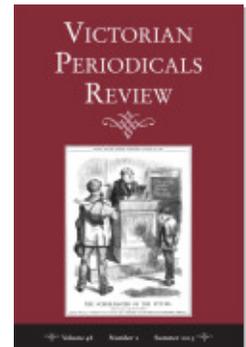
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## Tweeting the Victorians

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# Tweeting the Victorians

BOB NICHOLSON

I can still remember the moment when I discovered the work of Patrick Leary. I was kneeling in the dimly-lit stacks of my university library, browsing through copies of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* in the hope of finding reading material for an undergraduate essay. Paper between my fingers, dust in the air, and library carpet scratching against my knees—this was a curiously analogue way to encounter the future of digital research. I suspect that few of you are reading this article in a similar place. As Leary predicted, academic scholarship has now moved decisively from a world of print to one of pixels. A paper copy of this journal will sit on a shelf in my office, but it will function more as a trophy than a text, something to be seen rather than read. Instead, most scholars will digest it via its “digital surrogate”—a term that seems increasingly anachronistic now that digital tools have become the primary means by which we produce, consume, and discuss our scholarship. Rather than browse through library stacks, readers will find their way here via a range of bibliographical databases, online publishing platforms, electronic citations, and search engines. These channels of discovery were already falling into place when Leary took stock of the digital landscape back in 2005. However, I suspect that many readers will also have navigated to this article via a newer set of pathways—ones that lead from the world of social media.

The potential of social media looms large in Leary’s article. He recognises that the true power of the internet was in “connecting people, not merely with information, but with one another, often in the most unexpected and fruitful ways.”<sup>1</sup> In Leary’s examples, these networks are built via email and the “fortuitous electronic connections” made possible by search engines such as Google.<sup>2</sup> Such technologies continue to be important; Leary’s own Victoria listserv, for example, has been a valuable forum for discussing Victorian studies for twenty years and continues to thrive despite its reliance on what now feels like ancient technology. However, since the publication of Leary’s article, a range of important new social

media platforms have emerged and become firmly entrenched within scholarly discourse. WordPress, the open-access blogging platform, emerged in 2003 and has now become one of the backbones of the internet alongside longer-running services such as Google's Blogger. Facebook was launched in 2004, followed a year later by YouTube. Twitter, a hybrid social-network and micro-blogging platform, arrived in 2006 and has become an equally ubiquitous part of the digital landscape.<sup>3</sup> These titans of social media have been joined by social news communities such as Digg (2004) and Reddit (2005); image-based social networks such as Flickr (2004), Tumblr (2007), and Pinterest (2010); and, for history enthusiasts, the expansion of social-networking features on genealogical websites. All of these platforms are, to a greater or lesser extent, now being used for scholarly purposes.

It is easy to see why. While web design once seemed like a complex, expensive, and technically intimidating craft, it is now possible for anybody with a computer to set up an attractive and fully functional website for free in a matter of hours. This has led to a proliferation of academic blogs, including many devoted to the field of Victorian studies.<sup>4</sup> These blogs initially emerged as a marginalised supplement to more conventional forms of academic writing. I started my own relatively modest offering in December 2011 in order to review digital archives, discuss ongoing research projects, and share my thoughts on topics that were not suited to a weighty, peer-reviewed academic journal.<sup>5</sup> However, the lines between blogging and academic publishing are becoming increasingly blurred. Many of the footnotes for this article lead to blog posts rather than journal articles, largely because this is where many of the most interesting discussions about the future of humanities research are now taking place. *The Journal of Victorian Culture* has a successful open-access companion blog built using WordPress which ably supports the work of the main journal.<sup>6</sup> All academic referencing guides now inform us how to correctly cite a blog, and in 2012 the MLA added a specific format for referencing tweets. All of these developments are gradually drawing social media into mainstream academic discourse.

### Open Access

Whilst these initiatives have yet to gain the recognition and authority of conventional academic publishing, the flexibility and accessibility of open-access blogging platforms have raised pressing questions about the closed and sluggish nature of the existing system. After all, why should scholars pay subscription charges to access research that we already produce, peer-review, and edit for free? In the age of low-cost, open-access blogging, it is becoming increasingly difficult to see what academic publishers still bring to the table.<sup>7</sup> As much as I love *Victorian Periodicals Review* and the

valuable financial support it provides to the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, it sits behind a paywall that prevents many potential readers from accessing its riches. What is more, it is tied into a slow-moving publishing cycle designed to accommodate the practicalities of print rather than the immediacy of digital discourse. Take this article, for example. I wrote the first draft in March 2014, made some minor edits a year later, and now expect it to reach you sometime in mid-2015. In the meantime, debates around open-access publishing have moved on. If I had chosen to publish this article as a blog post—or submitted it to an open-access repository—it would have been released immediately and made available to a much wider potential audience. These claims are borne out by readership statistics. All of the top-five “most read” articles on the *Journal of Victorian Culture’s* website were published as open access or made open on a short-term basis. One of my own articles falls into the latter category. It was accessed less than a hundred times when behind a paywall; as soon as this barrier was temporarily lifted, these viewing figures soared above 800, largely driven by the freedom it gave me to share the article using Twitter, Facebook, and online communities such as Reddit’s “/r/AskHistorians.”<sup>8</sup>

Twitter, in particular, has emerged as a powerful tool for disseminating ideas, kick-starting discussions, and leading new readers to our research. While the service is often dismissed as a platform for the mundane observations of Z-list celebrities, it is also home to thousands of scholars who generally have much more interesting things to share. Rather than meet fellow Victorianists once or twice a year at conferences, many of us now engage in a continuous online conversation. At the time of writing, I have accumulated approximately 4,000 Twitter followers (which adds up to about 0.05 percent of Justin Bieber’s following)—a relatively modest network, but one that allows me to reach as many people with a single tweet as all of my academic publications and conference appearances combined. Crucially, these conversations need not be limited to professional scholars. Twitter allows us to connect with librarians, archivists, museum workers, journalists, TV producers, novelists, artists, genealogists, teachers, and history enthusiasts from the general public—few of whom engage with academic discourse through conventional channels. At a time when funding bodies increasingly require us to demonstrate the public “impact” of our research, this ability to communicate with a non-academic audience and make connections with other media outlets is particularly valuable. Paywalls act as a fatal obstacle to these networks; we can lead new readers to our work, but we cannot expect them to pay for a four-page review of a book that costs more than the book itself.<sup>9</sup> There are many issues to be overcome before open access is established as a viable alternative to conventional academic publishing, but its potential is clear. If we want to share our research with

the widest possible audience, engage in more dynamic conversations with other scholars, and make the most of the digital tools at our disposal, then we need to move beyond a system built on paper and controlled by the vested interests of commercial publishers.<sup>10</sup>

### A Culture of Retweeting

The case for open access stretches beyond academic publishing. In “Googling the Victorians,” Leary compared the digital turn in humanities research to the “unprecedented frenzy of reprinting” that took place between the curtailment of copyright in 1774 and its reinstatement in 1842.<sup>11</sup> In truth, this pervasive culture of reprinting continued to thrive well beyond the 1840s: George Newnes’ phenomenally successful *Tit-Bits*, founded in 1881, was composed entirely of articles clipped from other sources, a format that inspired many imitators. Here was a time when information flowed freely between different publishing platforms, reached new audiences, and remained open to forms of creative remediation. The large-scale digitization of Victorian print culture has injected new life into this process; the fossilized texts of nineteenth-century newspapers have been reanimated and reintroduced into our cultural bloodstream. Over the last year, I have begun tweeting a regular stream of humorous images and extracts from the *Illustrated Police News*. Like a Victorian sub-editor armed with a pair of scissors and pot of paste, I pore through back issues of the paper looking for articles that have topical resonance (romantic suicides for Valentine’s day, people being burned to death by Christmas trees, and so forth) or those that seem peculiar enough to capture my followers’ attention (“A Girl Terrified to Death by a Donkey”). Some then choose to “re-tweet” these clippings to their own followers, and they are subsequently passed on from user to user and to other forms of social media until I lose sight of them. In the process, some of these “editors” re-imagine the clippings by appending their own explanations, observations, and humorous remarks. The dynamics of this twenty-first-century culture of reprinting and remediation closely mirror the circulation of humorous miscellany in the Victorian press.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is wonderful to see Victorian print culture being enjoyed again in this way—not just as an ossified object of scholarly research or a trail of genealogical breadcrumbs but as a form of entertainment.

Just as in the nineteenth century, this culture of re-tweeting is dependent on the unimpeded circulation of information. The ownership of materials digitized from the public domain is an area of growing tension between researchers and commercial publishers. In 2004, Leary predicted that “non-profit, publicly funded, open-access projects [would] proceed in par-

allel with commercial, subscription based initiatives.”<sup>13</sup> At that point, the balance between the two was fairly even. However, in the case of the Victorian press, the vast majority of papers have subsequently been digitized by commercial publishers such as Gale, ProQuest, and DC Thompson. In their defence, these companies have produced high-quality databases that have now become indispensable to our research; my own work would have been impossible without Gale’s *Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers* collection. But this has come at a cost. Subscription fees severely restrict the number of people who can make use of these resources; this applies particularly to independent scholars and schools that lack the resources of a well-funded university library.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, during the digitization process these publishers have gained copyright control over the digital surrogates of public-domain texts. Gale’s terms and conditions allow authorized users to “make a single print, non-electronic copy of a permitted portion of the content for personal, non-commercial, educational purposes only.”<sup>15</sup> However, we “may not modify, publish, transmit (including, but not limited to, by way of e-mail, facsimile or other electronic means), display, participate in the transfer or sale of, create derivative works based on, or in any other way exploit any of [their] content.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, no tweeting. In truth, publishers have shown little inclination to pursue small-scale breeches of copyright. Indeed, the owners of the British Newspaper Archive actively encourage their users to share material in this way. Just as in the nineteenth-century, there is a gap between law and practice. However, commercial control over digitized newspaper data has more serious implications for scholars who wish to develop ambitious digital humanities projects. The open-access nature of archives in other countries, such as *Chronicling America*, *Trove*, and *Welsh Newspapers Online*, has opened the door to a range of exciting new projects, but the bulk of the British Victorian press remains closed to these developments.<sup>17</sup> Whilst it may be possible to negotiate access to commercially owned data, the final decision ultimately rests with publishers and will be determined by their commercial interests. We have reached a point where the scope of our research is increasingly defined not by what is possible but by what is permissible.

There are signs that this situation may be changing. In 2014, the British government modified copyright legislation in order to allow researchers to explore commercial digital archives using text and data mining techniques. However, these new regulations have yet to be put to the test, and it is unclear how they will apply to researchers based outside of the United Kingdom. For example, while the Translantis project based at Utrecht University has permission to data-mine large-scale collections of European newspapers in search of references to the United States, at the time of writing they have yet to be given full access to data from British newspaper archives.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the Victorian press will necessarily be excluded from

their analysis. In the coming years, the most innovative digital humanities projects will follow the path of least resistance and focus their resources on unrestricted datasets. There is a real danger that the paywalls that have been erected around databases of British newspapers and periodicals will exclude them from this cutting-edge research.

As Leary predicted, advances in digital technology have continued to encourage a “profound shift in our everyday working relationship to the Victorian past.”<sup>19</sup> The emergence of social-media platforms such as WordPress and Twitter has expanded the range of “fortuitous electronic connections” described in his article; researchers, readers, ideas, and sources have been united in a shared digital ecosystem that enables new connections to take place “across national, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries.”<sup>20</sup> Academic discourse is more open now than ever before, but the potential of this “digital turn” in humanities scholarship will not be fully realised until the barriers erected around academic publishing and digitization are removed.<sup>21</sup> If there is to be a “renewed sense of common purpose” among Victorianists, then let it be this.

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## NOTES

1. Patrick Leary, “Googling the Victorians,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005): 83.
2. *Ibid.*, 72.
3. Indeed, these services have all become so ubiquitous that describing them here feels somewhat ridiculous—though the pace of technological change and the fading memory of fallen online giants such as MySpace and GeoCities should remind us of their fragility.
4. For an excellent exploration of academic blogging in the field of Victorian studies, see Amber K. Regis, “Early Career Victorianists and Social Media: Impact, Audience and Online Identities,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 3 (2012): 355–63. For current examples of academic blogs, see Melodee Beals, <http://mhbeals.com>; Amateur Casual, *The Victorianist*, <http://thevictorianist.blogspot.co.uk>; Paul Dobraszcyk, *Rag-Picking History*, <http://ragpickinghistory.co.uk>; Lee Jackson, *The Cat’s Meat Shop*, <http://www.catsmeatshop.blogspot.co.uk>; Lucinda Matthews-Jones, <http://lucindamatthewsjones.com>; Charlotte Mathieson, <http://charlottemathieson.wordpress.com>; Jim Mussell, <http://jimmussell.com>; and Amber Regis, *Looking Glasses At Odd Corners*, <http://amberregis.blogspot.co.uk>.
5. Bob Nicholson, *The Digital Victorianist*, <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com>.
6. *Journal of Victorian Culture Online*, <http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc>.

7. M. H. Beals, "'Rapunzel and the Ivory Tower': How Open Access Will Save the Humanities (from Themselves)," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18, no. 4 (2013): 548–50.
8. <http://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians>. For an introduction to AskHistorians, see Bob Nicholson, "The World outside Academia: Exploring Reddit's AskHistorians," *History Lab Plus*, September 18, 2013, <http://historylab-plus.wordpress.com/2013/09/18/the-world-outside-academia-exploring-reddits-askhistorians>.
9. Bob Nicholson, "Open Access: The \$2,950 Book Review," *Digital Victorianist*, June 19, 2013, <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2013/06/open-access-book-revie>.
10. For a useful summary of the open access debate, see "Digital Forum: Open Access," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18, no. 4 (2013): 526–57.
11. Leary, "Googling the Victorians," 78.
12. Bob Nicholson, "'You Kick the Bucket; We Do the Rest!': Jokes and the Culture of Reprinting in the Transatlantic Press," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 3 (2012): 273–86.
13. Leary, "Googling the Victorians," 78.
14. Andrew Prescott, "Dennis the Paywall Menace Stalks the Archives," *Digital Riffs*, February 2, 2014, <http://digitalriffs.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/dennis-paywall-menace-stalks-archives.html>.
15. "Privacy Statement and Terms of Use for Gale Electronic Products," accessed March 22, 2015, <http://www.gale.cengage.com/epcopyright/index.htm>.
16. *Ibid.*
17. See, for example, "Viral Texts: Mapping Networks of Reprinting in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Newspapers and Magazines," <http://www.viraltexts.org>.
18. "Translantis: Digital Humanities Approaches to Reference Cultures: The Emergence of the United States in Public Discourse in the Netherlands, 1890–1990," accessed March 22, 2015, <http://translantis.wp.hum.uu.nl>.
19. Leary, "Googling the Victorians," 73.
20. *Ibid.*, 84.
21. Bob Nicholson, "The Digital Turn," *Media History* 19, no. 1 (2012): 59–73.