

## Keywords for a Digital Profession

### Public

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In July 2005, a pseudonymous columnist in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Ivan Tribble,” sparked heated controversy among bloggers when he complained that a search committee reading academic blogs felt as though they were journeying into “the dank, dark depths of the blogger's tormented soul; in other cases, the far limits of techno-geekdom; and in one case, a cat better off left in the bag.” As of November 10, 2007, meanwhile, the commenting guidelines to a new political theory blog, *Public Reason*—which restricted posting to those with .edu addresses—had generated one hundred comments at *Crooked Timber*, ranging from supportive to harshly antagonistic. What do these two debates tell us about tensions surrounding the term “public” as it applies to academic participation in online blogs and communities? On the one hand, some non-blogging (and, for that matter, blogging) academics argue that, by *publicizing* their private lives online, bloggers fail to respect the norms of both professional self-presentation and professional rhetoric. On the other, participants in electronic forums, whether affiliated with a university or not, whether in a given discipline or not, wish to be counted as valued contributors to an online, intellectual *public* sphere, and challenge attempts to restrict their access thereto.

It is impossible to give one-size-fits-all advice to graduate students or faculty anxious about establishing themselves in cyberspace, given the uncertainty in academic circles about what blogging does or even what a blog *is*. Instead, as a way of negotiating these debates over online publicity and publics, I want to analyze the rhetoric of overwhelming *excess* that frequently characterizes even less heated exchanges. At various times, critics have suggested that bloggers write too much, reveal too much, or cover too much; personal information, ranging from dating habits to pet photos, sits next to a critical account of the latest book by Slavoj Žižek. By the same token, bloggers overpopulate the public sphere, substituting cacophony for reasoned discourse and flame wars for dialogue. Moreover, some would argue, blogging renders its academic practitioners excessively visible, thanks to search engines such as Google and Technorati. Even practices designed to facilitate participating in online publics while minimizing publicity, like pseudonyms or anonymous posting, themselves become signs of excess.

Blogging extends pre-existing academic practices, as well as deviates from them. Most notably, blogging's juxtaposition of the personal and the professional emerges from shifts in academic discourse during the 1990s, when scholars from multiple disciplines sought to ground their academic work in their personal life. Yet a wide range of blogs subsist awkwardly under the umbrella of “academic blogging”: blogs devoted almost entirely to professional/scholarly topics; blogs which mix the scholarly with the personal; blogs which are “academic” because their writers are. In addition, unlike scholarly journals and monographs—housed in libraries which may restrict their access, priced out of the reach of many individuals, and, even when electronic,

not necessarily accessible to the general public—academic blogs share platforms (Typepad, Blogger, LiveJournal) with their non-academic counterparts, and their discourse may take on a remarkable similarity to that of “fan” blogs. Under the circumstances, what happens to the public image of the “academic” or “intellectual,” and how might that reshape our understanding of the online public sphere?