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Three Years of Savage Minds

From Blog to Scholarly Civil Society

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The online blog *Savage Minds* was founded in April 2005 by Kerim Friedman, Alex Golub, Christopher Kelty and Dustin Wax, and since that time has included Thomas Strong, Kathleen Lowery, Nancy Leclerc and a host of guest bloggers ranging from emeritus professors to graduate students. Around 2004, academic blogging emerged out of the world of personal journals and political sites; *Savage Minds* was launched at a moment when scholars in political science, history, economics, literature, linguistics and the physical sciences had already established group blogs. Such blogs have become more than just personal sites or mailing lists—they are a new genre and a new forum for networking, gossiping and debating. As a genre, blogs rest somewhere between the informality of an email and the formality of peer-reviewed publications. As a forum, *Savage Minds* connects graduate students and scholars, it reports quickly and informally on news of note and it is a locus of activism for areas ranging from open access to evolutionary psychology, institutional review boards, intellectual property and the role of the military in anthropology. At its best, the medium combines the individual eloquence of a well-constructed op-ed piece and the immediacy and dynamism of a mailing-list conversation. They are not a replacement for journals or conferences, but they do provide a healthy dose of hotel lobby and water cooler conversation—something most anthropologists crave in the 11 months between professional meetings.

There are few reliable measures of success in the world of academic blogs, but we do know that *Savage Minds* has over a thousand subscribers (and probably many more occasional readers) from all over the world and across all subfields of the discipline. In 2006 *Savage Minds* was listed as one of *Nature*

magazine's top 20 science blogs. There are also many lessons to be learned from this experiment—lessons we think departments, scholarly societies and individual scholars should be taking seriously.

Of the lessons we have learned, the most obvious, is that blogs—as a genre—are here to stay: they are a remarkably variable feature of the media landscape, but one especially suited to dynamic discussion, sharing of ideas and tracking of debates—functions that used to be served solely by journals and newsletters. Another lesson is that the medium has its own vagaries: discussions that emerge are noisy and occasionally chaotic, which one could argue is the price of lively, substantive dialogue. A thoughtful post can generate deep discussion, provocative ideas, and new, unexpected lines of inquiry. Although blogs are sometimes perceived as “author-driven”

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(if not self-indulgent), our experience has been the opposite: the true creators of the blog—and the source of our success—are the community of scholars and students that read and contribute to it regularly and at length.

Savage Minds has also helped bring a variety of new and competing sites into existence, and we count this as a key success in broadening the ecology of available discussions. Old partners, such as *Anthropology.net* and *Antropologi.info*, have been joined by new websites, including *Culture Matters* (<http://culturematters.wordpress.com>), *Material World* (www.material-world.com), *Museum Anthropology* (<http://museumanthropology.blogspot.com>), and *Linguistic Anthropology* (<http://linganth.blogspot.com>). This kind of

network gives blog contributors and readers a strong sense of participating in an ongoing, reflective and organized public sphere. Like all public spheres, it is messy, and the welter of cross-citation and dialogue grows quickly.

Savage Minds also serves a purpose that scholarly journals once served (but may no longer): knowing what's hot, debating current events in an anthropological idiom and generally “keeping up” with a very large and diverse field. Indeed, the subtitle we chose for *Savage Minds* is “Notes and Queries in Anthropology”—a subtitle meant to reflect the tradition of short communiqués, debates and idea-sharing that used to be the role of journals and scholarly newsletters. In an era when we all spend far more time in front of Google than we do at the library, such innovations will be essential to the survival of the discipline. As such, *Savage Minds* is the beginning of a “scholarly civil society”—a public that exists outside of and in critical relationship to the institutions of our discipline. We need more such fora—independent, enthusiastic, critical, playful, creative, unconstrained and loosely coupled, created to promote the open circulation of debates and ideas—for our discipline to flourish.

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