BLOGGING OLIVE

Deborah Withers interviewed Ana Laura López de la Torre of the Remembering Olive Collective on 21 September 2009 about using web 2.0 publishing tools to document history. This interview is an excerpt from her booklet Self-Publishing and Empowerment: A Resource for Community Groups *available to download from her website in January 2010. See: http://www.debi-rah.net.*

Deborah Withers (DW): What are the benefits of blogs to self-publish information and what do you see as the drawbacks as well?

Ana Laura López de la Torre (AL): The main advantage I think is that it is free, so it's great if you don't have any funding and that was originally why the blog was the starting point for the project. Because it was totally un-funded and it was a good way of putting the call out for people who wanted to be involved, and at the same time as information was coming in to publish it straight away. So it is very immediate and that really appealed to me at that early stage, because the main thing was that there was nothing on the Internet about Olive. You know that was the first thing that was quite significant. So this idea that we could publish immediately what came out without having to spend a lot of time, you know, designing and printing without the money to do those things was quite appealing.

I cannot think of any major drawback other than what happens with Internet technology – they might be superseded by other technology or maybe the provider will change, I think that is what happens with Hotmail accounts: at some point the computer might not support it and you might have to get a new computer. Companies sell to others and you get passed onto a different supplier, but we've been using Wordpress for three years and it seems to be quite a stable platform and I guess this idea of backing up information in some other form [or] either printing it. In our case we were very lucky because the British Library has a digital preservation programme and they are going to be archiving the blog and Lambeth Archives too, so we don't really need to worry about that. That's the only drawback that I see and then there [are] some people who are not familiar with technology so it's not accessible for them as users, they can read it if they have access to the Internet but to publish it requires not a high level [of expertise] but you need to be comfortable with computers.

DW: I agree, I don't think blogs are as easy as people say they are. Are there any ways in which the Collective has tried to disseminate confidence amongst the group or is it always people who are computer savvy who use the blog?

AL: In terms of reading it this proved to be very accessible, our older members could read it and look for information and we had people posting comments from older generations, I don't think there was a major problem with dropping a comment on the blog.

In terms of publishing and using the back end of the blog, there were some people who found it very easy and they didn't need any support, they just registered and starting to

work on it straight away and then we ran–I ran a workshop because I set it up and I was quite familiar with how it works. I use it a lot, so I ran a workshop introducing people to the back end and, you know, the different functions and then sometimes do one-to-one sessions when someone is responsible for an area of the blog and I sit with the person and go through the functionality, what you can do. And there are some people, I think mainly it's an issue of time, to sit down and do it, and even if you told someone, if they don't start doing it straight away it's quite easy to forget what you are supposed to do and another thing that happens is Wordpress – the platform that we use – they are constantly making it better so they change the way it looks and you might be shown the way to use it and you might go back four months later and everything looks different, and that can be quite disorientating for people. But, in general, if anybody shows interest and wants to know the way it works either me or someone [the most expert users] will be around to show a person how to do it.

DW: I think you've covered this, but is it fair to say that blogs are user-friendly?

AL: I can add something to that. I think as far as Internet platforms are concerned, Wordpress I think is quite user-friendly. Also it's very flexible so you can do a lot. I have used other blogs, I have used Blogspot [blogger.com] and I find that it is more confusing and you can do less things with it. Again, depending on your access to technology and your familiarity with it, it can be better or worse. Compared to other things I tried to use like wiki's, I could never crack my way around a wiki and I'm not a super techy person myself. I think in the scale of things, it's not as easy as using email but not as difficult as using a wiki.

DW: How has the blog empowered the Collective to present information about Olive Morris and UK black history to new audiences? Do you think there is a connection between self-publishing and empowerment?

AL: It has really been an amazing tool for us, because compared to doing talks or distributing leaflets, first is the issue of not spending anything other than time, that you can do at all times, for example I do a lot of work late in the evenings. I am a single parent, so I am homebound, I cannot go out and we don't have access to photocopiers, so I think in that sense it has been great and people do come across it. They read through it and comment, you know, "what a great blog." People come across it in the most unlikely ways. We always get a report on the blog on the search strings that people are using to look for information in the internet and we get people who are not necessarily looking for Olive Morris and they come for all different reasons. There is some information there we publish that is not published on the Internet at all. There is nothing, for example on the British Black Panthers, and if you type "British Black Panthers" we come on top so I think it has been really instrumental in contributing to filling a gap about information online about this.

We also have a Facebook group, which reaches a different type of audience. We set it up because of the "everyone has Facebook" idea, but it was interesting to see that a nephew of Olive's found us through the Facebook group and he is someone who is not particularly a computer person, but Facebook is very popular. So we use the blog in conjunction with email, we send email with information, we publish the address of the blog in lots of places and we have the name of the blog on badges. Certainly it is a great way to reach a diverse audience and transnational audience too, so anyone from any part of the world can see it.

We do back it up with a lot of other things, we do a lot of talks and presentations and we try to have stalls especially at local community events because we are working with a historical generation that maybe use email but they stop there with computers, so the talks and the stalls and having badges backs that up for an older generation.

Empowerment, yeah, it's this whole thing about the self-publishing revolution that the Internet produced. It frees you from having to go through someone else to publish your information and I think we are looking at a lot of information from the 1970s, and in the 1970s everyone was self-publishing because printing was cheaper and it was easier. We are coming across all these newsletters and pamphlets that people were publishing, the community had access to that they owned the means of printing and producing. Maybe photocopying brought an end to that because I remember when photocopying came along and everyone ditched the old means and started photocopying things and using the computer and the printers and that became quite expensive with time. And now with self-publishing online is bring[ing] a revival of people publishing their own information. It would still be good to see the old self-style, paper self-publishing become a lot stronger, but I know that print-on-demand fills that gap a little bit but still relies on people using technology. We look at the old-style cut and paste, people would write something, cut it up and collage it and copy it somehow, all that is quite interesting.

DW: How has the blog enabled you to build community and share information with like-minded groups?

AL: The thing about blogs is that they are viral things. They just get picked up and re-published. We set up a Google alert on Olive Morris and the notifications that we get of Olive Morris being mentioned in other websites tend to be from the blogging community. There is an endless list of people blogging away and they might get something from our page and republish it or link to our site so I think there is this capacity to connect with other groups. We are geographically quite dispersed, although a few of us are from Brixton, there [are] a lot of members in East London, a lot of us are immigrants so we spend a substantial part of the year abroad, maybe visiting our families or for work, so it helps us also to gather around this space and you can always check what is going on by looking at blog and contributing when you are away. We have a member who has been in Norway now for two or three months, and she carries on working because she is organising the library on the blog. So when someone goes away the blog is a really good place for someone to keep engaged and contributing.

A lot of the requests we get to come and talk or to share information comes from people that found us on the Internet. They come across the blog and maybe drop us an email. We are getting a lot of requests from academics. People who are doing PhDs or higher research around black history, coming across our blog, asking us for more information, for contacts of people to interview, and also to share the research that they are doing. Already on our blog we have published two academic essays that were published in specialist research journals, so we are providing a platform for academic research to be really easily available for people who don't read academic journals, and that's something that's developing now and that's an interesting development for us and it's great because it's not something that we have to produce ourselves. We just re-publish, and it adds great content that has been properly researched and validated by peer research, so it really raises the standard of material that we can publish on the blog without us having to do it ourselves.

DW: Is there anything else you want to say about the blog?

AL: I'm very partial, it's my hobbyhorse in the project. I just wish I had more time to dedicate to it. The thing is the issue of time, which I think cuts across all community groups. There is always more that you want to do and you just can't because you haven't got the time, so we have a hell of a lot of information, text, images, that we just haven't got the physical time or capacity to publish. Having looked at our blog I think it has a lot of information so that even with our deficiencies we have managed to put quite a lot of stuff online.

At least once a month something new comes on the blog, which is quite important because you need to keep it active to harness that interest and also to get rankings in the search engines. If you publish once a year you lose visibility. It's like a newspaper that is not published. If there is no fresh stuff people might come and then not come again. We've been quite good at least once a month there is something new. Even sometimes it's just changing the home page, you know, just bringing something from the background to the foreground. We try to keep it interesting for people so that they can repeat their visit.