## Publish (online) or perish

By Nicholas Farrelly

Since the very first days of networked, electronic communication, universities and their staff have pioneered new systems of online information retrieval and management. Today's internet owes much of its success to the early enthusiasm shown by academics. The ".edu" and ".ac" domains of academic educational institutions are now a mark of quality content and reliable information. This is an enviable position.

At the same time, traditional outlets for scholarly writings—the expensive and painstakingly edited journals and monographs of the publishing trade—have come under increasing pressure to transform their business models. Disparate challenges to the authority of existing peer review systems have also come thick and fast. In every discipline of the social sciences there are rebellious factions seeking to re-define the limits of academically respectable scholarly outputs and forums. Countless e-zines, e-journals and blogs have emerged to challenge the shortcomings of more cumbersome, traditional formats.

Thankfully, within the broad umbrella of Asian Studies there has been a wide-ranging adoption of innovative information technology. Anybody who watches this process closely will know that it has not happened by accident! From the Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library, to the various H-NET forums, to the many impressive archives and bibliographies – every new electronic resource has required real creativity and diligence. And as new waves of technology have been adopted and popularised, the options for academics hoping to "go online" have multiplied. There is now a wonderful array of opportunities for Asian Studies scholars looking to take their work to the world.

With this in mind, in June 2006 I co-founded an academic web-blog on mainland Southeast Asia. It is hosted at the Australian National University where my partner in this endeavour, Dr Andrew Walker, is an anthropologist at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. We call our site *New Mandala*. At the beginning, *New Mandala* was intentionally experimental. We were unsure whether our brand of anecdote and analysis would garner *any* kind of audience. Then, in September 2006, the Thai army staged one of its sporadic coups and our hitherto obscure online undertaking was catapulted to prominence.

Since those tumultuous days, *New Mandala* has attracted and retained an audience much larger than the handfuls that attend conference presentations or read scholarly papers. This is not an attempt to gloat – it is merely the reality of the medium. Even our relatively small online presence garners many hundreds of daily visitors. And the numbers are continuing to grow. Today, our audience is drawn from every country of Southeast Asia and from well over a hundred other nations around the world. Many of our most regular and passionate readers are not academics. They often tell us that they

appreciate the openness of our editorial policy and the opportunity to engage with the big ideas in Southeast Asian Studies.

Over the past year we have hosted debates on issues including conference boycotts, corruption in rural Thailand, tourism to Burma and dams in Laos. Some of the most important discussions have focussed on the political, economic and social roles of the Thai monarchy. These are sensitive and controversial issues. They are also issues that have too rarely been subjected to academic scrutiny. Many of these robust conversations would, before the advent of such online forums, have been confined to the privacy of common rooms and the corridors of academic departments.

It is the apparent disorder of online life and the vigorous contestation of ideas that I expect puts off many potential academic bloggers. Of course, there are ferocious battles that require moderation and many anonymous critics lurk in the shadows. Some people may worry that this can only lead to anarchy. On the contrary, and to our delight, we have found that there is a collective (and often anonymous) effort to correct spurious assertions and to challenge the most explosive rhetoric. This is the way the system works (most of the time).

When it works well an academic website such as *New Mandala* can provide something approaching almost instantaneous peer review. Admittedly the reviews that emerge are a new and innovative sort, and are often challenging and confrontational. Such reviews do not always rely on the standard cadences and tropes of academic discourse. But I often wonder - is that not part of their value? On *New Mandala*, highly polished debaters can jostle, cheek by jowl, with interlocutors with only limited English. What they almost all share is a passion for debate and ideas, and for trying to understand Southeast Asia.

Clearly, the writing, managing and editing of a website like *New Mandala* takes time and energy. We have found that keeping a regular feed of interesting, relevant and provocative posts is essential to maintaining readership. An increasing number of guest contributors—some of whom are established in the field, and some are just getting started—have also begun to seek out our site as an outlet for their writings, pictures and thoughts. This is a very good sign and it helps to bring new voices to a wide audience.

From where I sit, the great strength of the Internet is, without doubt, its decentralised, heterogenous character. Providing an outlet for such diversity can, of course, be a role of both universities and individual academics. Asian Studies can offer much in this regard. Developing experiments like *New Mandala* is one way to create better networks, more cross-pollination and, thus, more promising ideas. We all know that Asian Studies has played a part in making the internet an incredible resource. Continuing to embrace online experiments and take up new technology will keep the study of Asia dynamic for many years to come.

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