Blogging as a US CRM professional

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Abstract:
In the practice of archaeology, engaging with the public is an important element. By doing so, archaeologists can help to explain the value of protecting cultural resources and the important data "in the ground." However, this interaction can also benefit the work of the archaeologist, in understanding the perspective of other stakeholders, as well as revealing sources and data not readily apparent otherwise.
Blogging, although in many ways more of a soliloquy than a dialogue, is one way that archaeologists can and do reach out to the public. By sharing data, pictures, and stories, the everyday work of an archaeologist is exposed to any who are interested. The information is more personalized, and the exchange more dynamic, than a static presentation of results.
For American cultural resource management (CRM) professionals, blogging presents a challenge. The projects are often small and unexciting, and negative results are the norm. State and federal laws are a consideration when discussing site finds. Clients may have non-disclosure contracts associated with a project, or monitor the Internet for any references to project details and negative comments. Often, there's a sense that you're trying to reach out to a public that just isn't there, or isn't responding. The work is unpaid, and finding the energy to write after a long, hot field day can be a challenge. However, blogging should become a more important part of the practice of CRM. Publicly funded projects in particular often require a public outreach component; blogging is a way of doing this real-time, and being more inclusive of the participants.

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As an American Cultural Resources Management (CRM) professional, or contract archaeologist working for a private company, I interact broadly with the public, but under their radar, every time I do a job. My work exists because of federal, state, and local regulations, which reflect the public interest in identifying and protecting (as necessary) this nation's cultural resources. Not only that, but part of my job is to help balance this public interest with other public interests, including cheap and/or green energy, new or better roads/bridges/waterlines/sewer lines, and places to shop, live, and play. Naturally, these interests can be contradictory, and the mediating function of my work should be understood by the public. This is especially true because public funds often directly pay for my work. Essentially, everyone is a stakeholder at different degrees. This includes those whose land is directly impacted by the project, the clients and other contractors working on the project, the end beneficiaries of the project, and finally anyone who has an interest in the cultural heritage of the area, or of the country.

One challenge in conducting public archaeology at the American CRM level is that most work, while conducted right under your nose, is not seen by the public. This extends from something as mundane as the holes I dig (covered in such a way so they're unnoticed), to the artifacts I find (either left in the field or stored at a curation facility, where they're only available to researchers), to the reports generated (often only submitted to the client and the permitting agency, at best a couple of hundred copies are printed). I know that some of the large excavation reports we've done for TxDOT are required to have a number of copies available with the site location information redacted for public distribution, but I couldn't tell you what libraries have them or how to get one. I can tell you, though, that even the best of these reports are written with the agency reviewers and other professionals in mind. And yet public outreach is often a required component of large-scale, publicly funded archaeological projects (and honestly should be considered an important part of any project).

Outside of the face-to-face interactions with the most direct stakeholders (landowners, clients, and other contractors), public archaeology at the CRM level is largely static. Company websites may write short blurbs about several projects, designed largely to highlight the company's ability to serve different clients and attract more work. In Texas, one of the main forms of public outreach is through the Texas Beyond History website, a public education website designed to "interpret and share the results of archeological and historical research on the cultural heritage of Texas with the citizens of Texas and the world. (http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/abouttbh/index.html, accessed March 2011)." The displays are educational, informative, accessible to non-specialists, and cover many aspects of archaeological work. The effect is that of a virtual museum, and in fact the site itself refers to it's content as "exhibits." However, like most museum exhibits, once you've read the text and looked at the pictures, there's nowhere to go with questions or comments, and you move on to the next room.

Archaeology blogs are a means to make the exchange more dynamic than a static presentation of results. Blogging is more personal, interactive, and potentially more inclusive, and can be done in real-time (or at least in a timely manner). Although blogging is in many ways more of a soliloquy than a dialogue, it is perhaps the best way for archaeologists to reach directly out to the public. By sharing data, pictures, videos, and stories, the everyday work of an archaeologist is exposed to any who are interested. The process is highlighted, and the many different hands and perspectives that contribute to the final product have a chance to be heard and recognized. Despite the obvious public interest aspects of professional archaeology, the amount of interaction and information is pretty sparse, one-sided, and tends only to happen at the end of a project (and only large projects at that).

I started my blog, Where In the Hell Am I, for two reasons. First, so my friends and family could keep track of where I am (thus the blog title). Second, so I could try and explain to them and anyone else who might find the blog just what it is I do, while it's happening, in a way that makes sense. Within the last year-and-a-half or so, I've gotten more and more into the idea of using it as a form of public outreach for projects I'm involved in, as a form of public archaeology. I don't really present high-falutin' theory on my blog, partly because that's a miniscule part of CRM (and even "miniscule" might be generous), and partly because I'm afraid it could turn potential readers off.

The main goal of my blogging is simply to get people to understand what cultural resources management entails, and what a CRM archaeologist does, and maybe find it interesting. By blogging about my work (and sharing photos through Flickr, along with Facebook updates and the occasional tweet) I can shed some light on the process and the results, hopefully so the public can understand what I do, why it's done, and why it matters. Blogging is perhaps the best means of direct engagement between professional archaeologists and the public, outside of face-to-face encounters (which usually are rushed because I'm on the clock and have a lot to do and am tired and sweaty and may not have anything cool to show you).

Secondly, I believe that my blogging helps demystify the work of archaeologists. Like most jobs, it's often mundane, boring, and repetitive. Archaeology is more about hoping to find cool sites than it is about actually finding them; we deal a lot more with "negative data", which as the saying goes "is still data" (and yes, I know "data" is plural). CRM archaeology isn't really like National Geographic or Discovery Channel digs, and while CRM finds do occasionally make the national media, those types of sites are extremely rare. But while our sites aren't as stunning or rich as the huge civilizations spotlighted on television, the information we recover can be just as significant to archaeology and to local history. It's not Pompeii or Teotihuacan or the Pyramids of Giza, but cultural heritage is still important enough that there are laws protecting sites, and time and money expended to identify them. If the public can understand this, they can better appreciate why cultural resources management practices are important and necessary, and might also raise awareness of stewardship. My idea is to let them know that there's archaeology all around them, and that they can be engaged in it while also respecting and protecting it.

One of the issues I face in the field, and think about in my use of the Internet for engaging the public, is dealing with collectors/relic hunters/looters. It's against the law for me to disclose the location of an archaeological site in Texas, but when discussing nice sites on my blog I try to put as little locational information as possible. You never know when a collector/looter is reading or Googling. Likewise, I remove any sensitive geotags from Flickr. Flickr is where I have actually encountered a collector, who commented on some of my artifact photos in relation to his own collection. Of course, I could not encourage the collecting of artifacts, regardless of the legalities, but I also felt like I couldn't just be out and out rude. Part of engaging in public archaeology is to view such things as educational opportunities, and a chance to create a steward. So in my posts and my work, I try not to scorn those folks who come up to me and want to talk about and/or show off their collections, as sometimes (unfortunately) this might be the only way that the information about a site is made available.

Finally, blogging allows for the narrative to enter more fully into public outreach. The general public might best understand the process of conducting archaeological research when related in the form of stories and photo features (such as Colleen's excellent comics). A good story engages the listener's (or reader's) attention, and opens up possible unforeseen avenues for questioning. For example, when I tell my rattlesnake bite story, people naturally focus at first on the details of the swelling and pain, and then the medical expense, as these are details they can most directly relate to. But then, they may ask why I was in Brownsville, why we were working in that particular area, and why we were metal detecting and how that works.

Furthermore, blogging can accommodate multiple narratives participating in order to create a larger perspective. Large projects have many archaeologists with different levels of expertise and areas of focus, yet generally only the perspectives of the lead or leads are presented to the public (either through outreach or in the form of a report). By having project blogs to which all staff can contribute, the full spectrum of archaeological work is available for the public with less of an expert filter, new ideas can be presented and discussed, and more stories can be told, raising more questions and comments. This level of inclusivity also allows the field technicians to have more of a stake in the project, rather than serving merely as a strong back with a pair of hands and eyes. This may also improve the quality of the fieldwork, as diggers feel more invested and feel encouraged to really think about and describe what they're doing.

However, American CRM professionals face special challenges when blogging. As I mentioned, state and federal laws are a consideration when discussing site finds. Clients may have non-disclosure contracts associated with a project, or monitor the Internet for any references to project details and negative comments. The clearest risk I take blogging is losing my job. My blog is a personal blog, about my experiences as an archaeologist, and I hope I've made it clear that these are my opinions only. My experiences are under the auspices of my employer, but I do not represent them in any official capacity, nor are my blog posts intended to represent the views or opinions of my company. Of course, I can repeat a million times that this is only my opinion, but if I piss off the wrong person, I could easily get fired. As such, I try to be vague about clients and project details, particularly as these details are often confidential and preliminary. In this way, I'm not only protecting myself as much as possible, but also showing professional respect for our clients.

This need for professionalism extends beyond the clients and job protection. While the blog posts should be personal, the goal is to share interesting stories about the work in order to inform the public. Don't blog with an ax to grind, and not just because you don't know who might see it. Honestly, a lot of the dead times between my posts is because I don't have anything nice to say.

Ideally, I would like for CRM firms to see the opportunity that blogging (along with photo and video sharing) allows for real-time (or near real-time) public outreach and interaction. It's relatively easy to do, with technological advances making it possible to do from almost everywhere now. Both blogging and media sharing also have low overhead costs, which is always a concern. The larger cost is paying for the time spent blogging, which could be included within a designated public outreach budget, or conducted under the auspices of fieldwork (for example, during project downtime or travel time). Certainly, constraints would have to exist to address the issues presented above; some amount of moderation would be necessary, perhaps through collaborative editing.

A number of large international projects and academic projects already have project blogs with multiple voices. In Austin, an excavation at the Vara Daniels site in the highly visible and heavily utilized Zilker Park included a site blog as a part of the large public outreach element of the work. A number of CRM firms have started to increase their web presence through Flickr and Twitter. And yet it's amazing how many firms and projects don't participate in blogging and media sharing, despite the common perception in the US that "everyone" blogs and tweets. I believe that environmental consulting companies that learn to fully utilize the array of new media possibilities to increase their public face and highlight all aspects of their work will attain a level of prestige that could help set them apart from their competitors. It would also help to counter the perception that cultural resources archaeology in the US is out of touch with the archaeological currents, hopelessly stuck in the time of chronology and typology.

I hope that more CRM archaeologists will take up the blogging mantle. Despite the ease of starting a blog, blogging itself is not easy. Often, there's a sense that you're trying to reach out to a public that just isn't there, or isn't responding. The work is unpaid, and finding the energy to write after a long, hot field day can be a challenge. But the work can be rewarding, and the more we make blogging a part of the practice of archaeology, the more likely it will be embraced by our employers and become paid work.

Perhaps someday, we can have the satisfaction of having someone say, "I saw some people out digging near my fence, and they said they were archaeologists doing a survey. I didn't quite get this, so I searched online and found your blog. After reading your posts, I understand what they were looking for, and why they were digging those holes out there. Thanks!"