

## Practicing Science Communication in Digital Media: A Course to Write the *Antike in Wien* Blog<sup>\*</sup>

Communicating research to the general public and disseminating research results is becoming increasingly important in academia. In November 2019, Germany's federal minister of education and research Anja Karliczek announced that science communication would be an integral part of the ministry's future research funding strategy and published a statement paper on the topic.<sup>1</sup> Many funding opportunities already require outreach activities, as is demonstrated by the ERC's *Social Media Guide for EU Funded Research and Innovation Projects* in the Horizon 2020 program.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the public relations departments of, for example, museums or archaeological parks offer job opportunities especially for archaeology graduates with a bachelor's degree. However, while scholarly writing for an academic audience is traditionally part of the classics curriculum, science communication in digital media is rarely practiced during university studies. To fill this gap, I designed and taught a course entitled *Antike in Wien* ('Antiquity in Vienna') at the University of Vienna's Department of Classical Archaeology in 2017. The intention of this course was to make students familiar with research communication to a general public and to enable them to practice both analogue and digital outreach activities and research communication skills by giving guided tours, writing a blog, and sharing their work in social media. An additional aim of the course was to enhance the visibility of classical archaeology in Vienna by highlighting the relevance of classical antiquity in the city until today through content created by the participants. In this short contribution I wish to give an overview of this course, including an introduction to blog writing and social media for science communication, and review some results we gained from tracking our digital activities.

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\* The video of the talk, presented at the online conference *Teaching Classics in the Digital Age* on June 15-16, 2020, is available at <https://doi.org/10.5446/51976>.

1 Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2019a and 2019b. See also the ministry's webpage on science communication (Wissenschaftskommunikation).

2 European Commission 2020. The guide gives a useful overview of different social media platforms, explains how to create an account, offers insights into default settings for posts, and some general advice on the appropriate style and tone for social media. It also addresses important topics such as possible target audiences; the question which audiences can be reached on which platform is not considered, though.

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The *Antike in Wien* course focused on one specific topic in order to provide practical experience in science communication: Vienna's antique tradition. This topic offered several advantages: on the one hand, students could easily relate to this topic, as it allowed them to explore their resident city. On the other hand, the locality of the course topic enabled us to easily visit the places we discussed and shared in our communication activities, so that the students could also prepare and try out analogue outreach activities without the need to travel.

The course, valid 4.00 ECTS, was offered in the bachelor's curriculum as part of the required module *Excavation, Preservation of Monuments, Museum Studies* (Pflichtmodul 'Grabung und Survey, Denkmalpflege, Museumskunde') which at the time comprised all practical courses. The course itself was only offered once in the summer of 2017, in my last semester at the University of Vienna. Eighteen students participated, all except one from the Classical Archaeology Department, and including several Erasmus exchange students.

## **The recipe: science communication in different media**

I started preparing the course by producing a short 'rough and dirty' video for YouTube to advertise the course.<sup>3</sup> In one weekend, I recorded short sequences for the video on my walks through Vienna's city centre. The video served as an introduction to the blog written during the course, and was published in the online course catalogue in place of a descriptive text.

During the course, the students practiced three consecutive communication steps: 1) giving guided tours at chosen monuments, sites, and collections in Vienna, 2) writing a blog on the places we visited, and 3) sharing both the blog articles and impressions from the guided tours on social media. Our starting point was thus an analogue outreach activity whose results were then distributed in different digital media channels.

### **Guided tours**

The first step of our communication funnel were guided tours, a very familiar analogue outreach activity utilised in museums, university collections, and archaeological sites around the globe. The monuments, sites, and collections we selected were all easily accessible within Vienna so that anyone who might become interested through our outreach activities could visit them without obstacles. After a visit to the Kunsthistorisches Museum with a first guided tour conducted by Georg Plattner, director of the museum's antiquities collection, the students took over: each week, they prepared guided tours at one or two sites, individually or in groups of two, depending on the size of the site. We visited well-known landmarks such as the Karlskirche, the Theseus temple in the Volks-

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<sup>3</sup> The video is embedded in the blog *Antike in Wien* 2017a.



Fig. 1: Guided tour in the Schönbrunn castle gardens (photo: K. Meinecke).

garten, the parliament and the Academy of Fine Arts, both built by Theophil Hansen in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as lesser known monuments such as the Tegethoff monument in the shape of a *columna rostrata* at Praterstern. Collections we visited included Sigmund Freud's antiquities at the Sigmund-Freud-Museum, the Roman inscriptions integrated into the walls of the staircase at Vienna's national library, as well as the city's two plaster cast collections, one held at the Academy of Fine Arts and the other within our own department.<sup>4</sup> We also explored Vienna's Roman history in the city centre, including a visit to the Römermuseum. Outdoors, we headed to the Biedermeier cemetery of St. Marx and the Schönbrunn castle gardens with their fake Roman ruins (Fig. 1), and finished our course with a walk through Vienna's historic city centre looking out for antique elements in extant architecture and statues. Since we wanted to present ancient sculptures or monuments which may have served as models for the architects and artists and show them as comparisons for the monuments we discussed, the students prepared handouts for the participants to consult during the guided tours. After each tour, we held a group discussion on how the classical tradition could be made more visible and accessible to visitors through information panels, markers on the floor, apps with audio guides, or similar measures at the relevant sites and monuments.

<sup>4</sup> The two plaster cast collections are the only sites we visited which are less easily accessible, as they are only open by appointment to interested visitors; see the blog post on 'Gipssammlungen in Wien', <<https://antikeinwien.wordpress.com/2017/06/02/gipssammlungen-in-wien/>> (last accessed May 27, 2021).

## The blog

At the heart of the project was the blog *Antike in Wien*. Proceeding from the guided tours they had prepared the students wrote an article for the blog, writing either individually or in groups of two. In preparation for the course, I set up the blog on the blog hosting platform *WordPress.com*. In the simplest version, this site is free to use and independent of university resources. It uses the popular content management system WordPress and is easy to use (I already had experience with it from previous private blog projects). In addition, it conveniently enables tracking of the blog's performance through its integrated statistical tools.

By definition of the Cambridge Dictionary, a 'blog' is a "a regular record of your thoughts, opinions, or experiences that you put on the internet for other people to read".<sup>5</sup> Blogs in academia can be characterised as "the missing link between raw materials and traditional research output", such as publications in print or online journals, monographs, and edited volumes.<sup>6</sup> In the humanities, blogs are written especially to give insights into scholarly work routines, to share hypotheses or unpublished ideas, or to express the researcher's subjective opinion in a first person narrative, which is less accepted in more traditional publication genres.<sup>7</sup> Blogs in the humanities are mostly aimed at an academic audience: a recent survey of academic blogs on the platform *de.hypotheses* by Mareike König revealed that a small majority of scholarly bloggers (52%) write for other academics, while only 13% blog for the general public.<sup>8</sup> These blogs thus mainly serve networking purposes and are used to make the authors, their ideas, and research topics known to the academic community.<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, blogs in the humanities are only seldom used to communicate with a wider public.

In our course, we chose a different approach. Instead of targeting other academics, we wrote for a non-academic, general audience interested in culture, the history of Vienna, classical antiquity and its tradition, as well as other, similar topics. Our blog served as a digital outreach activity but was nevertheless meant to be research-based. It was thus essential that all information presented was well-researched, correct, and up-to-date. Since the objective of the blog was to make readers curious to discover and visit collections and monuments across Vienna, our posts also contained all the necessary information for visitors to access the sites, monuments, and collections we presented.

Defining the target audience and the general objective are among the first essential steps when setting up a blog, as they determine the content of your posts. In addition, it is helpful to decide on further criteria for the content and formal layout of the texts in

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5 Cambridge Dictionary s. v. 'blog'.

6 König 2020a.

7 Ibid.

8 König 2019, 19: 18% of the interviewed said they were not blogging for everyone or not for any specific audience, 10% answered that their audience varied depending on the topic of the blog article, and 2% had not been thinking about their audience at all.

9 König 2020b. For further details see König 2020a. Also compare the blog article and podcast by Schumacher 2020.

advance, especially if the blog is written collaboratively by several authors, as was the case in our course, in order to give the blog a certain consistency and recognizability. I therefore defined the following formal criteria for the structure of the blog posts:

- The text should have a maximum length of 600 words and no footnotes. In general, online texts should not be too long, as reading habits on the internet differ from reading printed texts. Readers often skim online texts and display a shorter attention span.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, an informative title and first paragraph are essential. For the same reason, online texts should be written in a simple, easily comprehensible, and somewhat conversational language, avoiding complicated sentence structures and unexplained technical terms. Since students generally experience writing longer texts, rather than shorter ones, during their studies, the word limit turned out to be the most challenging of the criteria for the course participants. Most blog posts therefore turned out slightly longer, at around 800–1000 words.
- As our blog was meant to be research-based, between one and three essential references should be included at the end of each article for anyone who wants to read more on the topic.
- Each article should contain between one and five informative pictures of the discussed site, monument, or collection. The pictures should have a caption which should include the photographer's name and any other relevant copyright information. Respecting copyright was a major part of the assignment and as such, for all pictures taken inside of museums, the students were obliged to contact the institutions and ask for permission to publish the photos online. All participating institutions generously granted permission.<sup>11</sup>
- Finally, the text should contain information for visitors regarding access to the places discussed in the text. Therefore, we included a link to the official website where information on opening hours, ticket prices, and so on could be found, and we embedded a Google map with the address. We deliberately omitted opening hours and other such information from the text of the posts, so as to reduce the amount of maintenance required to keep the information up to date.
- At the end of each article, the author's name should be stated.

While in general it can be useful to develop a specific tonality for the blog texts to ensure a certain consistency across the different articles, in this course, I deliberately chose not to give the participants too precise instructions (apart from the word limit and the general recommendations for writing online texts). I did not interfere with the

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<sup>10</sup> Two examples for studies on reading on the internet are Nielsen 1997 and Pernice 2017.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the participating institutions for generously granting us access, often for free or with reduced entrance fees, as well as permission to publish the photos made by the students on the blog.

outline, the use of sub-headings, or how the content was presented, because I wanted the students to develop their own approach to their relevant topics and above all to have fun writing these texts for a general public. It was important that they kept in mind the audience for whom they were writing. I encouraged them to include anecdotes or interesting details to keep their readers' attention, and for the majority of the articles this worked out very well. We ended up with very diverse posts that, for example, discussed antique elements to be discovered in architecture, made readers curious with titles quoting Sigmund Freud or Monty Python's "Life of Brian", or were written in the form of a dialogue between empress Maria Theresia and her architect. In our case, this variety made the blog authentic – it was, after all, a blog written by students.

As I wanted to give the students as much freedom as possible when writing their blog posts, we did not implement any criteria for SEO (search engine optimization) in the texts either. For example, we did not conduct any keyword research. As a research-based blog, our focus was more on the content and the information we wanted to communicate than on the number of clicks on our website. As far as I can see, SEO is not a significant topic in science communication yet, especially in German-speaking academia.<sup>12</sup> SEO may merit inclusion, however, depending on the aim of your blog, your audience and topic, as well as your potential competition. For universities competing for students, it might be interesting to appear further up in the search engine result pages than their competitors.<sup>13</sup> The same is true if you want your blog to be easily found in a search engine when someone researches a certain topic, for example a colleague or a journalist. Therefore, implementing SEO may help to enhance the visibility of a scholarly blog.

A central characteristic of blogs is that new content is posted on a regular basis. This helps build an audience, keeps readers interested, and motivates them to return to the blog. To ensure that new content appeared regularly, we followed a time schedule for the publication of our blog articles: they should go online three weeks after the guided tours. This gave the students one week to write the article, one week for peer feedback and revisions, and one week for me to give a final feedback and for the publication of the article. For most blog posts, this schedule worked out well, and they were published on time.

An essential part of our blog-writing process was the peer review. For this, I created a forum in Moodle, the University of Vienna's e-learning platform, in which the students uploaded their texts, and their fellow students could then comment on them. This method allowed the students to reflect on their work and learn from each other. Compared to my previous experiences with peer reviews in courses at BA level, this particular peer review process worked astonishingly well. Almost all students regularly commented

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<sup>12</sup> A high-ranking article giving first insights into SEO for science communication that appears among the first search results in Google for the keywords "SEO Wissenschaftskommunikation" is Geu 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Dunkhase 2020.

on their fellow students' articles. With some guidelines at hand,<sup>14</sup> their feedback was respectful and fair, and they appropriately pointed out the texts' strong points as well as passages that needed improvement. The peer review therefore not only enhanced motivation among the participants, but also contributed to the quality of the blog articles.

When the blog articles were ready for publication, I either invited students to insert their texts and images on Wordpress.com together with me, so they could experience the process first-hand, or I uploaded their posts for them, depending on the students' interest and time constraints.<sup>15</sup> The uploading process is generally more time consuming than expected: apart from inserting the text into the online editing form, images had to be uploaded and captions added, a featured image for the preview chosen and cropped if necessary, a category added, and a Google link created to embed the map. For this reason it was not always possible to upload the posts together with the authors.

## Social media

As the final step in our communication funnel, we promoted our activities on social media. At the beginning of the course, I defined two hashtags for sharing the link to the blog articles as well as impressions from the course: '#AntikeinWien', the name and topic of the course, and '#ikavienna', the abbreviation of the Department of Classical Archaeology (Institut für Klassische Archäologie – IKA) in Vienna. The latter hashtag already existed prior to the course and had been started by Dominik Hagmann, then one of the student assistants in the department, to share department news on Twitter. Unlike the #AntikeinWien hashtag, it is still being used in this context on various social media platforms by different users, in project channels as well as by students in their personal accounts.<sup>16</sup>

In the news forum of the e-learning course on Moodle, I posted an announcement whenever a new blog article was published so that the students could start sharing it on social media. The students were free to decide whether they wanted to use social media and if so, which platform they preferred. The most popular platform amongst the students for this purpose turned out to be the social networking website Facebook. Facebook allows registered users to publish messages including photos, videos, and links, which depending on the user's personal settings can be read either only by the user's friends or are openly accessible. From the blog's statistics, it became evident

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14 I provided the guidelines for the peer review at the beginning of the course. They included which questions the feedback should answer and how it should be written: for example, in a positive, constructive manner offering perspectives for future work, in a respectful and appropriate tone, subjectively formulating own impressions and observations. And, most important: always keep in mind how you personally want to receive feedback.

15 Because I set up the blog with my private Wordpress.com account, unfortunately I could not then pass on the log-in data.

16 See, for example, how this hashtag is openly promoted on the official page of Roman archaeology at the Department of Classical Archaeology, University of Vienna 2020.

that a lot of readers were redirected to the blog from Facebook. I myself used the microblogging service Twitter to share impressions from the guided tours and announce the publication of new blog posts. Twitter allows posts of 280 characters (at the time only 140) which can include links and photos; posts are openly visible to anyone on the internet. Dominik Hagmann also tweeted about the articles, both in his personal account and through the department's official Roman archaeology account. None of the students chose to use Twitter, as is discussed further down.

Apart from Facebook, the other platform preferred by the students was Instagram. Instagram is mostly used to share photos which are freely accessible to anyone on the internet. Since it is not possible to integrate links into Instagram posts, though, it was more difficult to promote the blog on this platform. Students shared some pictures from the guided tours, and they also began to use the course's hashtags for activities which were not part of the course itself on Instagram.

In addition, we collaborated with the university's PR department in a takeover of the university's official Instagram account (@univienna). At that time, the university's account was managed on a weekly rotation between different members of the university, each of whom shared pictures with short texts on a certain topic. Two students from our course took over the account at the end of June 2017 and shared impressions from our guided tours as well as pictures about studying Classical Archaeology in Vienna. They shared the link to our blog in the description of their first photo, and during their takeover of the university's Instagram it was also inserted into the account's bio, the only place where a clickable link is possible on that platform. The advantage of the takeover was that we reached all the university's followers and did not have to build our own audience first. The takeover was very well received and gained a lot of likes and positive comments.

The choice of platforms used by the students in the course reflects the general use of these social media services in the German-speaking regions. A study on online communities conducted by the German public broadcasting services ARD and ZDF in 2019 questioned 2000 people in Germany aged 14 and above who used social media at least once a week.<sup>17</sup> The study revealed that of the platforms we used during the course, Facebook is the most popular among all age groups: 31% of the respondents used Facebook at least once a week. Among those aged 14 to 49, half of the social media users regularly visit Facebook (48% of those aged 14–29 and 46% of those aged 30–49), while older age groups use it much less. For Instagram, there is a clear preference in the younger age group: while 59% of those aged 14–29 use Instagram, only 17% of those aged 30–49 and even less in higher age groups reported checking this platform at least once a week. Twitter is not especially popular with any age group in Germany: it was only used by 4% of the overall respondents and 6% of those aged 14–29, while among

<sup>17</sup> This statistic was part of the 'ARD/ZDF Onlinestudie 2020' (see 'ARD/ZDF Onlinestudie 2020').



those aged 30–49 the percentage was slightly higher at 7%. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that the students were not using Twitter and did not create Twitter profiles for the course.

As already indicated above, the various platforms not only have different user groups, they are also accessed for diverse purposes.<sup>18</sup> Both Facebook and Instagram are used mostly to communicate with friends. Facebook is especially useful for private conversations because of its networking setup. As almost all institutions, companies, restaurants, bands, and other cultural and business entities have a Facebook page, this platform is also consulted to learn about events. Twitter, in contrast, is especially popular for acquiring information, reading the news, or following influencers and topics of personal or professional interest. Again, this is reflected by the fact that many institutions, companies, politicians, journalists – and academics – run a Twitter account. Therefore, when setting up a social media profile, the intended audience and the kind of information you wish to share should be considered. To keep in touch with and make projects known to institutions, funding agencies, politicians, journalists, and other academics, Twitter may be a good choice. For reaching students and sharing pictures from activities and events, Instagram might be the preferred medium. Facebook, through its relatively large audience in comparison to other platforms and fairly even distribution among age groups, remains a good platform for announcements of any kind.

## Tracking the blog's success

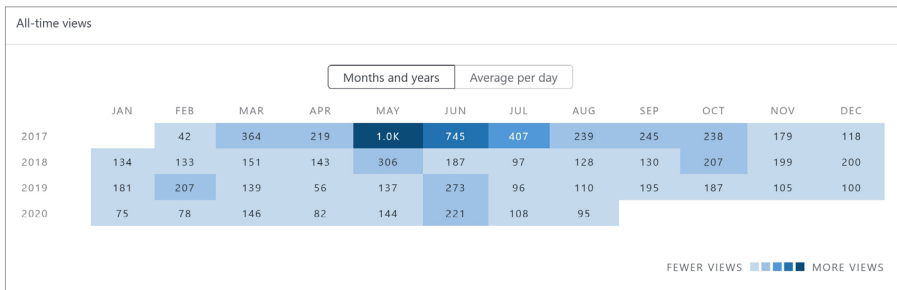
A convenient feature of *Wordpress.com* is the integrated analytics tool which automatically compiles statistics to track reader behaviour. These statistics quickly give an overview of the traffic on the blog and its origin. In total, we published thirteen articles on the blog. Since setting it up in February 2017, the blog had 3328 visitors and 8561 views.<sup>19</sup> As expected, readers come mostly from Austria (5218 views from February 2017 to August 2020) and Germany (1944 views in the same time period). Most visitors accessed the blog via the homepage. Among the articles which were accessed directly, the article on the Karlskirche was the most popular with 595 views, followed by the article on Freud's collection of antiquities with 476 views, and the article on Vienna's Roman history with 398 views.

The all-time statistics show that the blog performed best in the year the course took place (Fig. 2). The strongest months were May to July 2017, the three months when we published the articles and promoted them on social media. The strongest day ever,

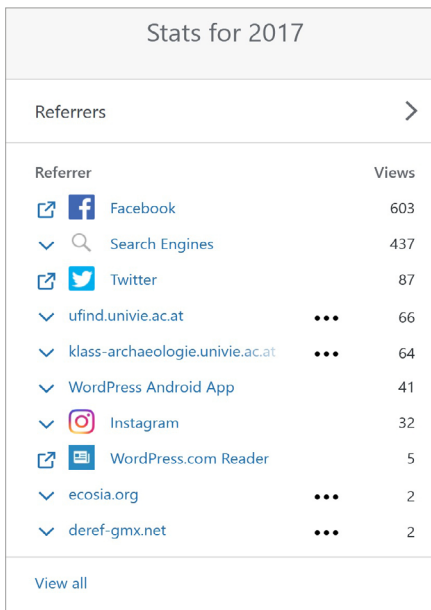
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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Snapchat's Apposphere study which questioned 1,005 app users aged 13–44 (2020).

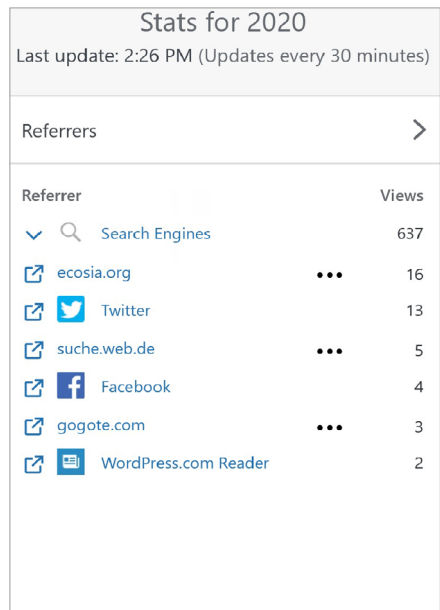
<sup>19</sup> One view means that the page with the article was opened; each visitor thus most likely read multiple articles or at least viewed multiple pages.



**Fig. 2:** All-time views on the blog from the *Wordpress.com* statistics tool (screenshot from [antikeinwien.wordpress.com](https://antikeinwien.wordpress.com), accessed August 16, 2020).



**Fig. 3:** Referral statistics for 2017 from the *Wordpress.com* statistics tool (screenshot from [antikeinwien.wordpress.com](https://antikeinwien.wordpress.com), accessed August 16, 2020).



**Fig. 4:** Referral statistics for 2020 from the *Wordpress.com* statistics tool (screenshot from [antikeinwien.wordpress.com](https://antikeinwien.wordpress.com), accessed August 16, 2020).

May 3, 2017, was the day after the post on Freud’s collection was published. The numbers of views decreased rapidly when we stopped promoting the blog. While the site had 3806 views from February to December 2017, it dropped to 2015 in 2018 and down to 949 from January to August 2020. Nevertheless, these numbers demonstrate

that the blog articles are still being read. A recent strong month was June 2020 with 221 views, the month in which the *Teaching Classics in the Digital Age* conference took place and I again promoted the blog on Twitter as well as in my conference presentation.

As the referral statistics reveal, sharing the blog posts on social media had a significant impact on the number of visitors on our page. In 2017 (Fig. 3), 603 referrals to the blog came from Facebook, 87 from Twitter, and only 32 from Instagram. The latter shows that although the students' Instagram posts had hundreds of likes during the takeover in June, hardly any of the readers clicked the link to the blog in the bio or copied the link from the first post. An Instagram profile might therefore help to raise awareness for a project, but is less significant in generating traffic to a promoted website. In 2020, the vast majority of referrals came from search engines, while only 13 clicked a link to the blog on Twitter and 4 were redirected from Facebook (Fig. 4). Positively speaking, even without SEO, the articles are obviously still listed high enough in search engines' search results to be found by potential readers. The blog thus continues to promote the relevance of classical antiquity and its continued legacy in Vienna. However, with continuous promotion via social media, the numbers of views could probably be much higher.

## Learnings and outlook

The *Antike in Wien* course was a good opportunity not only to practice, but also to track the effects of research communication. A mixture of different analogue and digital outreach activities served to promote content to different audiences. This choice of outreach activities and social media channels as well as the content produced for them should all be tailored to the expected audience, the desired outcome of the communication, and the style of the chosen medium. Nevertheless, it takes time and continuous posting to build an audience which keeps returning to your website or social media profile. Evaluating the blog's reader statistics showed that promoting content through social media obviously helps to generate traffic to your website. Nevertheless, when no new content is produced and old content is not redistributed, the number of visitors rapidly declines.

From a teaching perspective, the students' feedback on the course revealed that the participants enjoyed learning new things about their city, writing about their discoveries in the blog articles, and sharing their work with friends on social media. The blog not only provided an easy way to practice writing for a larger, general audience, but also to make the students' work visible. This was a motivational factor which should not be underestimated and, together with the peer review process, contributed to the high quality of the texts on the blog.

The *Antike in Wien* course was an experiment that did not follow any established course format in the curriculum. Unfortunately it was offered only once, because I left Vienna shortly after. Nevertheless, as there are many monuments, museums, and sites reflecting Vienna's antique tradition still waiting to be explored, I hope there will be an opportunity for a sequel course to continue the blog in the future. I would like to improve or adapt some of the elements of the course, should I teach it again. In this first course, I chose the monuments we visited and defined the criteria for the blog posts prior to the course, as the focus was on the field trips and the writing experience. For a subsequent course, I would consider shifting the focus to the conception of the blog: the students as a group could research and select which sites to discuss in their blog articles and make agreements with the relevant institutions. After analysing best practice examples, they could then define a target audience and develop criteria for the texts as well as a tonality for the social media posts. In addition, I would make social media usage mandatory. Instead of having the students use only their private profiles, I would perhaps set up an *Antike in Wien* profile on each platform, which could then be taken over by a different student or group of students every week or with the publication of each new blog article. This way, students could explore different ways of posting on various social media platforms without having to set up or use their private profiles. A further idea would be to include YouTube as another, very popular social media platform, for which the course participants could produce short videos on their chosen monuments. As other conference participants pointed out in the discussion of my presentation, even without guided tours (and during times of online teaching), skills such as the conceptualization of a blog, content creation for a general audience, and posting on social media can also be taught and practiced online, and with contact restrictions. I do hope that in the future there will be an opportunity for a sequel of the *Antike in Wien* course with the suggested improvements, enabling the revival of the blog and the '#AntikeinWien' hashtag and to further enhance students' science communication skills.

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