The Lone Medievalist: Casting the Net

Sarah Barott & Rachel Munson, The Lone Medievalist Staff

When we first attended the International Congress for Medieval Studies in 2013, we had just begun to dip our toes into the expansive world of Medieval Studies. When we returned home we were so inspired that we both began extensively studying the Middle Ages and founded the Bemidji State University Medieval Club. Within months we had a solid community of medievalists and we felt at home. In 2015 at the 50th Annual International Congress for Medieval Studies, we attended the “Ballad of the Lone Medievalist” panel hosted by Dr. Kisha Tracy of Fitchburg State University and Dr. John Sexton of Bridgewater State University. We were astonished by how many medievalists felt alone at their universities. Didn’t everyone have a colleague who studied medieval scholarship on their campus? The surprising answer was no. It was our understanding that the Lone Medievalist project, founded by Dr. Tracy and Dr. Sexton, began with the intent of creating a series of panels and publications to connect medievalists from around the world. We recognized the Lone Medievalist project’s need for a more substantial community outside of the short amount of time allotted them at conferences. We thought a good basis would be to create a virtual community that emulated what we felt on our home campus.
Sarah then suggested an online hub which would allow medieval scholars to join together, share in discussion, trade syllabi, and connect for conferences. The next thing we knew we were having lunch with Dr. Tracy and Dr. Sexton and were exploring the idea further. We left our meeting with the go-ahead to get a website up and running for The Lone Medievalist.

The four of us began having weekly digital meetings to establish who was emailing whom, what projects we wanted to begin, and how we would create and edit our site. Before launching the website, a network of support was needed. We had compiled an extensive list of medievalist contacts and called upon all of them for help. One of the things that always fascinated us about the medieval conference system is the willingness to help burgeoning scholars.

Sarah Barott on Website Development

Our main goals for the website are collaboration, community, and scholarship. We wanted to create a resource for everyone to use and a way to get in touch with scholars from other schools. However, forming a community created a couple problems that we did not foresee.

The first large problem we ran into was deciding what tone to set for the website. We wanted to gear everything toward the Lone Medievalist, but we also wanted to make sure that we could get in touch with people from larger research universities to help recreate the collective that exists within these institutions at smaller universities. The website needed to be scholarly and have information readily-available, but also create the kind of engaging academic experience people have come to expect from their media. We wanted to include the jokes that no one else seemed to get and the open, helpful sense of comradery that we found at Kalamazoo. The Lone Medievalist Online has been designed to be informal and welcoming, but professional and scholarly.

Once we set the tone, we had to decide what type of website to use. After various suggestions ranging from a blog to a wiki, we settled on Wix. Wix.com is a program that helps the less-
than tech savvy design websites. Wix is creator-friendly, easy to set-up and to maintain. There are applications available for purchase, but a problem with Wix is that it’s difficult to get people to use said applications. For instance our discussion board “Mutt” takes people away from the website and forces them to register on a different page. We feel that this has deterred many people from using our discussion board, which is unfortunate because we envisioned it being such a wonderful tool.

Another app that caused a problem on the site was the syllabi drop box. We designed this area of the site for scholars to place any syllabi they felt comfortable sharing. The first app that we used on Wix was not helpful, in that it would only show one syllabi at a time. We wanted a whole bank of syllabi for people to draw from, not just one highlighted syllabus. We thought about creating a Dropbox, but decided to use Google Drive instead. This has been incredibly helpful because, when people send syllabi to the Lone Medievalist, we can click once and share it on the site. So far we’ve received syllabi from a diverse group of scholars. Now that this issue has been fixed, the Google Drive works well for its purposes.

Many discussions revolved around what type of content to add to the site. Because the site is run by a small group of volunteers (five to be exact), we rely on suggestions from others. So far getting people involved on the actual website has been difficult. Our social media stream, an area on our homepage that publishes our Facebook and Twitter feeds, has almost taken the place of a chat room. Initially, we had hoped that the site would provide a sense of community that took place directly at thelonemedievalist.com and not exclusively on social media. As things stand, The Lone Medievalist Online seems to be working as more of a newsletter and announcements of what we do.

One feature we were excited about was the Google Map application. We placed a comment bar next to the Google Map in hopes that our viewers (currently 1881) would place unique and unexpected resources on the map. We wanted larger libraries,

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1 As of July 2016.
museums, high schools, or smaller colleges looking for steady lecture streams, language camps, etc. The Lone Medievalist must look for out-of-the-box places to get to a physical community that can help keep skills in English, History, Archaeology, and the Arts honed. We are worried that the red dots might become an overwhelming sea, therefore we are exploring the use of another map system, but for now the map works wonderfully.

Our syllabi drop box, book review section, and other content-driven areas of the site caused a bit of discussion concerning how open we wanted the site to be. While the goal of The Lone Medievalist Online is to be open to the public we felt that much of the response areas, syllabi content, and book reviews warranted an amount of privacy and user control. We considered privacy settings to protect intellectual property as much as possible. In our digital age of online harassment, we also felt it necessary to know who was logging onto the site and to retain the right to block them from the site if necessary (Wix does provide this ability). As a result, members of the website are asked to log in with an email address and password. We debated for a while on the necessity of having guidelines on an academic site, as we didn’t want to impede anyone’s discussion. In the end we decided that an open community like ours must have guidelines to follow. We have done our best to encourage discussion while still maintaining standards. We have not seen any problems like this occur, but feel that being prepared never hurts.

We currently have 188 site members, people who have created accounts and now have access to the full expanse of the website. This number is much lower than our social interactions on Facebook and Twitter, which hasn’t troubled us too much. It is much easier to “like” a page on Facebook and checking Facebook for updates has been integrated into daily life. We know that it will take time before the same can be said for The Lone Medievalist website, but we hope to obtain the same sense of automatically checking for new content at least once a month.
Rachel Munson on Social Media

Social media sites are intricate webs that allow for successful marketing campaigns, public outreach, personal and business-based promotions, and act as resources for connections and memes. I began creating the Lone Medievalist social media outlets on August 6, 2015 by creating a Twitter account, a Facebook page, and a Pinterest profile. In my experience, Twitter and Facebook are the social media outlets on which we can obtain maximum impact. The Pinterest page acts primarily as storage for medieval content, such as pictures, articles, etc.

Facebook has become a major marketing resource. People of nearly any age, businesses both large and small, public figures (such as Chaucer), and even cats have Facebook. It works as a useful tool for starting and sustaining community. Within the first day of being live on Facebook, we had 146 followers. Within the first week, 264 followers. Within the first month, 312 followers. As of July 21st, 2016, a little less than a year old, we gathered 585 followers and are averaging a total reach of 4,665 Facebook users a week.²

The Lone Medievalist Online’s launch occurred on August 10, 2015,³ and we intentionally published the site after the establishment of our social media outlets and the commencement of an intense social media campaign to gain momentum for the project. I created a total of twenty postable graphics to engage and excite our followers in the four days leading to the website’s reveal. Creating a graphic for followers to interact with visually

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² Total reach is defined as all those who have seen our posts. Typically on Facebook, a single activity will tell you how many people have clicked “like” on said activity and how many people the post has reached. Followers and non-followers can see our posts and Facebook is set up by its managers to show posts to various users.

³ Due to the anticipation and build of the launch, August analytics demonstrate a strong outlier peak, hence the sharp decrease between August and September on the above graph. As the project ages more accurate numbers will be attained.
is one of the best tools that social media managers can use to increase engagement.

Collecting analytical data is vital in creating a clear and succinct plan for the future. Since our Facebook birth, The Lone Medievalist has averaged two “likes” every day, a daily engagement\(^4\) of seventy-eight users, a daily organic reach\(^5\) of 930, and 57,975 organic impressions\(^6\) per 28-day cycle.

A benefit to our Lone Medievalist team has been having a very interactive co-founder who is able to access and share content. Dr. Tracy has been pivotal in the development and engagement of our social media outlets and followers.

There was a time when Twitter and Facebook battled for user attention, but over the past few years it has become clear that using both outlets is the recipe for a successful marketing campaign. Twitter, with its high-paced atmosphere, allows for more

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4 Facebook engagement is based on those who interact with our page, whether is be a physical click or a story generated from our content.
5 Organic reach is measured by how many Facebook users have visited our Page, or saw our Page or one of its posts in their news feed or ticker. This includes those who have “liked” our Page and those who have yet to like our Page.
6 Organic impressions represents the number of times our posted content was seen in a Facebook News Feed or ticker.
frequent and repetitive content posts. In the world of Facebook, with the strict EdgeRank algorithm, it is possible to drown content, meaning that posts get buried and not seen, thus making the post’s value nearly moot. On Twitter, a user must constantly post in order to not get lost amongst all the content that Twitter users are posting. Since our Twitter page was launched on August 7, 2015, we have made 941 Tweets, gathered 530 followers, and have followed 420 other Twitter users. Our Twitter handle is @LoneMedievalist, and, although we have had mild success with our hash-tagging efforts, there is still a lot of engagement work to be done on Twitter.

Moving forward it is my goal to track Twitter analytical data more thoroughly and accurately. It remains true that gathering analytical data is extremely important and having a strong team of co-workers to assist in the actual content posts allows me more time to focus on the metrics of what works and what doesn't for any given social media campaign and outlet. My goal for the future of @LoneMedievalist on Twitter is to maintain

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7 The EdgeRank Algorithm is a strict formula set in place with the creators of Facebook to monitor any given post's organic reach and impressions.

8 An identifying hashtag, a word or phrase that is associated with a specific Twitter page or topic.
and gather more metrics to assist in the development of future marketing plans for this project. Overall, analytics prove that we have been averaging a 17.37% increase in engagement from month to month demonstrating the success of our campaign. This is impressive for being less than a year old.

A challenge that we have confronted is engaging both men and women equally. Being a team of three women (Sarah Barott, Dr. Tracy, and myself) and one man (Dr. Sexton), many of our social media posts have a distinctly feminine voice. This is not a bad thing, and we do not mean to say that genders cannot intersect but we fear that we are missing a potential audience. On Facebook, 61% of our current9 followers are women, and 37% are men. According to a study conducted by Monica Anderson with the Pew Research Center study in 2015, a heavier female presence on Facebook is not uncommon, sitting at about 77% in relation to 66% male counterparts.10 However, Sarah and I have brainstormed heavily on how to attract and engage more men with our page. We are still working on building our male audience. We have also discussed how to engage a wider spectrum of age groups. Our age demographic primarily lies between the ages of 25 and 44 years old. 38.6% of our female followers and 23.2% of our male followers fall within this age range. Yes, this is a wide age range and is an entirely acceptable and appreciated age group, but the more the merrier. Our next largest age group are those who fall between 45 and 54 years old. 17.06% of our total followers fall within that age spectrum. This is not a significant deviation from Facebook demographics which conveys an 82% usage rate from 18 to 29 year olds, 79% of 30 to 49 year olds, and 64% of 50 to 64 year olds,11 however consistent outreach to varying demographics is the best marketing strategy we can employ.

9 As of June 2016.
10 Monica Anderson, “Men catch up with women on overall social media use,” Pew Research Center (August 2015), http://pewrsr.ch/1KS03ST.
When Sarah and I joined this project in May of 2015, we had a clear understanding that this was to be a global campaign to unite Lone Medievalists within a cohesive and communicative hub. This understanding was only strengthened with our social media presence as, though the majority of our followers live within the United States (65.469%), 33.149% of our followers live elsewhere. We engage with Lone Medievalists from the United Kingdom, France, The Bahamas, Vietnam, Brazil, etc. We cross language barriers and interact with those who speak Portuguese, Italian, German, etc. Our efforts in the world of social media is truly crossing borders and connecting medievalists in ways that it never has before.

Another challenge that we’ve faced recently is a discussion on what type of information we want to post to our social media feed. We want the site to portray professionalism and scholarship, but it is important in an online setting to include pop/modern culture. Thus, it is important to provide our followers will a variety of information that covers a wide range of topics and appeal. We want to be as comfortable posting from Buzzfeed as we are from scholarly publications. Sometimes a little humor, such as the existence of cookie cutters in the shape of a castle or a cat sitting on a gargoyle, can go a long way—especially in the world of social media. Sometimes communities need the lighthearted side of life, along with the heavier scholarly life. Our ability to post a spectrum of content has worked wonders in gaining followers and engagement.

Creating a heavy online presence in the world of Medieval Studies is something that has not really been done before. Yes, there are organizations that infiltrate and promote cross-cultural and cross-border interactions, but creating an arena that is both informal and professional is something that has not yet been seen. We have received and addressed comments about this issue, and, when we have been asked why we post comics, middlebrow, or trendy articles to our social media pages and

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12 The picture we posted of a cat sitting on a gargoyle from the National Trust had an organic reach of 937 people and gathered 50 likes.
website, the simple answer is this: we recognize the importance of upholding the standards of scholarship and professionalism, but in an online setting that is meant to foster a familial community essence, not everything is 100% formal. We wanted to create a community that could operate like a family: with laughter, discussion, formalities, and informalities. This, we believe, is the basis of a well-built community that will last and welcome medievalists of all ages and experience. Further, if we want to create a community that mimics that of a campus environment, we must also invoke the humor and kindness that drew us to the field in the first place.

The Future

Sarah traveled to the Southeastern Medieval Association (SEMA) conference, during which The Lone Medievalist held an informal dinner to ask for feedback, comments, or suggestions that might aid in our success. The dinner went extremely well, and we gleaned a great deal of useful information. One suggestion that we have decided to implement is a book review resource on the site. We do have an informal book review section of the site, but the new book review area will be geared towards Lone Medievalists who need books that deal in generalities for less specific areas of study. The trick to executing this new page successfully will be getting actual reviews from participants.

One of the main problems that has come up repeatedly when we speak to Lone Medievalists is how to integrate medieval topics into English survey classes. Many people don't have the time to search for a student-level book that is not hyper-focused. We want to start assigning books to undergraduates to foster young writers in professionalism and have them shortly offer a review of the book, commenting on how helpful it was and what it entails that might work for more generalized courses. With the book review site we would like to post ideas and specific syllabi for which this approach has worked: for example, integrating the medieval into composition classes if possible. This would give Lone Medievalists a source for find-
ing books to buy for the library, their classes, or themselves without being forced to research extensively. The added benefit of helping professionalize graduate students would make this project a worthwhile endeavor.

Simplicity is vital in our endeavor. Understanding the busy and crowded lives that Lone Medievalists live, we want to create as many simple resources as possible on our site. A concern that we have heard (and experienced) a multitude of times is the loss of language skills due to busy schedules. One area of the site we would like to establish is a language page, on which people could start correspondence in Old English, Old Norse, or Latin, etc. It would contain links, fun language challenges (such as a book club that reads *Alice in Wonderland* in Old English together), or just a place to discuss a problems with translation. Again, the chat room forum has been suggested for this area, but a more structured approach seems like a good idea as well. Our goal is to make pursuing skills and passions as easy as possible in the busy lives of medievalists.

Another future idea we are looking into is a guide to help create a medieval club on any campus as a means to provide Lone Medievalists a way to reach out to students. This guide would be easily printable and have a list of ideas that would work on any given campus. We recognize that every campus is unique and that the guide may not apply to every campus, but we would strive to make it as general as possible.

Another area that we intend to expand upon in the future is travel funding. Many Lone Medievalists struggle with finding funding for trips to conferences, research, and other related costs. Our end goal for this section of The Lone Medievalist Online would be a page of easily accessible grants for smaller schools. When a Lone Medievalist is asked to teach a heavy load, he/she doesn’t always have time to hunt down research grants. At this point, The Lone Medievalist would step in and create a network so they wouldn’t have to do so.

Further, the site is designed to assist in the social components of scholarship. We do have the conference connection page for medievalists to connect at conferences and assist them
in finding rides, scheduling dinners, etc. However, the area we want to work on is identifying other Lone Medievalists at conferences. In the (admittedly few) conferences we have attended, we’ve always been with a small group but interacted with many people who came by themselves. If we could publicize where we are going to be at any given time during a conference, or if a Lone Medievalist wanted to ask a question about what hotels to check out, where everyone will be eating dinner, and other pertinent information from our site, we could eliminate the feeling of being alone at conferences. It’s hard to be in a place where everyone else seems to know someone. This application/announcement/social media presence would give the Lone Medievalist a chance to meet others who are also visiting a new city by themselves. We are currently working on an identifying tool to be worn or displayed at conferences for Lone Medievalists; at the International Congress in 2016, we handed out stickers with our logo to help Lone Medievalists find each other. This is also when Twitter becomes an essential component of the medievalist’s life. We are very rarely away from their cell phones or wireless devices, Facebook, or Twitter. At conferences, Tweeting is on the rise. We plan to Tweet at any and all of our upcoming conferences.

We have big plans for the future of The Lone Medievalist Online. More importantly, we feel we have struck a nerve and have expanded upon the need discovered by Dr. Tracy and Dr. Sexton for a cohesive community of Lone Medievalists. In our ever-changing world of technology and social interactions, there is infinite opportunity for growth and expansion for medieval academia. Digital humanities provide tools that are proving to be increasingly helpful in the world of medieval scholarship, bridging geographical gaps by acting as vehicles for sharing content, ideas, and passions.