

Beer writing and new media

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Not a physical location but a shifting network, an ebb and flow of information and attitude. An ethereal presence at my desk, my dining table, at the bar, in the festival tent, on a hillside. It's all about the interaction [of drinkers], only the assembly of likeminds and dialogue is via social media rather than face-to-face. It's the virtualisation of latter-day café culture, where the sense of place is bound no longer by walls but by bandwidth.

When I drink a beer and mention it on my Twitter feed, on Facebook, on RateBeer, on this blog, I get a response. Some want to share their enjoyment (or disappointment). Some want to enjoy a vicarious drinking experience. Sometimes I ask questions about the beer; sometimes they get answered ... I am drinking a beer within a community; that community is a place for debate and discussion and knowledge transfer and argument and agreement. It just happens to be on a phone or laptop rather than crowded around a table.¹

This is how Simon Johnson responded when faced with writing a blog post about drinking beer in a special location. He explains how he could've chosen any number of places, in bars and pubs around the world, but instead he picks something which 'augments the drinking experience': the online beer community.

Michael Jackson didn't have a blog, he wasn't on Twitter and it's almost certain that he didn't sign up to a Facebook account (where brewers could poke him to get his attention), but he did and does have a website and his work is still very present in the online world. His site - www.beerhunter.com - has articles dating from the mid-1980s right up until his death in 2007, looking at everything from beer style, travel, food and beer, brewery visits and brewing history. It's a veritable library and it's possible to get lost in his words for hours, clicking from one article to the next until you've travelled around the world and back again, leaving you gasping for a pint while searching for flights to Philadelphia, Patagonia or Prague. Most of these articles were initially written for print and then transferred to the site at a later date, preserving in an online archive what may otherwise have been lost to yellowing newsprint. Adrian Tierney-Jones describes the *Beer Hunter* website as

intensely valuable, a snapshot of a time in beer before beer coverage went into overload on the internet. [He adds:] You've got the books, but these are his reports from the front line of beer, reports from the man who really started covering beer in the same way High Johnson or - in an earlier age -

Cyril Ray ... covered wine. So it is an excellent and essential thing.

Michael's words have a timeless quality online and they feel fresh and new as if written yesterday (unlike the dating effect of photos in books); each one effortlessly telling a story, teaching and entertaining in equal measure. There's a fun, playful quality to the pieces on his website with titles as enticing as an illuminated sign announcing 'Beer Served Here' ('A saintly glass with the brothers of barley,' 'What to drink with a dog' and the wonderfully weird 'Japan's beer turns turtle - even in the land of Ninja'). Inside they are warm and there's an intangible comfort to reading them, as if Michael were sitting behind your screen, telling you a story which fascinates him greatly.

Michael was able to raise beer up to be a craft product deserving of serious, intelligent consideration, where worldwide there are many different and unique varieties, all of which he excitedly brought to others, encouraging readers to find them for themselves. The eloquent simplicity in the descriptions of beers still have the power to instil thirst in the reader now and that's the everlasting success of Michael's writing. It's fair to say that we don't and won't have another Michael Jackson in the beer industry, but his work has inspired many others to write about beer and everyone who does so is in some way indebted to Michael. His website, where so many of his articles remain, is a very important legacy which means that next generations of

drinkers and writers will be able to discover him and read his work for themselves. Now, over 30 years after Michael wrote the first great book about beer - *The World Guide to Beer*² - there have never been more beer writers. Every day, all around the world, thousands of people are communicating about beer in a virtual environment. Whether it's in personal blogs or websites, twitter updates, videos, podcasts, forums or in community and review websites (such as *RateBeer* or *Beer in the Evening*), the internet has given a new platform to those who want to talk about beer away from the pub. It's now in the virtual spaces of the new media that serious appreciation can grow beyond the previous confines of the old media (print, TV and radio).

Most online beer writing is published in blogs, which are online journals typically personal to the author who retains their own character, avoiding a 'house style' - think of print journalism like a letter written on the company's headed paper while a blog is like a personal diary entry with the page left open for others to see. Anyone can start a blog and around the world hundreds of people have done so specifically to discuss beer. Some blog (to blog has become a verb) about going to pubs, some about drinking bottles at home, beer news, beer and food, travelling, home-brewing or pro-brewing - some mix everything into a great cornucopia of topics.

Tim Hampson, the Chairman of the British Guild of Beer Writers, who started

his own blog in August 2010,³ writes in a newsletter to Guild members:

There is something in the immediacy of [a blog] that is compelling while there is also a wonderful sense of camaraderie within the blogging community ... A static, rarely changing website might seem to be as good a showcase for people's work, but a blog is active, dynamic, and immediate, and therefore of great value.⁴

Jeff Evans, author of the *Good Bottled Beer Guides*, also publishes his work on *Inside Beer*⁵ and he says that

a lot of good stories were just being wasted because there are so few print outlets for beer features. Now, through my own online beer magazine, I can use them and reach a massive international audience.

Adrian Tierney-Jones, writer and editor of *1001 Beers to Try Before You Die*,⁶ explains why he started his blog *Called to the Bar*.⁷

I wanted an extra dimension to my writing, and I also wanted to exercise a freedom in writing about beer in a way that perhaps I don't always have when writing in newspapers and magazines. [He adds that he also likes the ability to] spontaneously report on beer, whether it's from the Czech Republic, a small pub in the middle of the Devon countryside or a beer festival in Vermont.

It's not just those who make their living as beer journalists who are turning to the internet and, in fact, there are more

'amateurs' who write beer blogs than professionals, choosing to do so in their spare time just because they like good beer and want to talk with others about it. Andy Mogg, who writes the blog *Beer Reviews*,⁸ says:

I blog about beer because it's a great way to record and explore my thoughts and feelings as I journey through the world of beer, it's also a great way of interacting with other people, starting and joining discussion and making new friends.

Mark Charwood, who writes *Beer. Birra. Bier*,⁹ explains that blogging

gives me a platform on which to be creative and it allows me to interact with people that share my enthusiasm and love for great beer. [He adds:] It's all about being able to splurge the beer-related things that run around my head onto a 'page' in a creative way and then having people be able to respond and interact to that. The interaction is the key to blogs being successful, I think.

This interaction is the real strength of the new media. In the old media interaction was only possible via a Dear Sir letter to editor but now comments can be left instantly, whether at the end of the blog itself or via social media (Twitter, Facebook), and these interactions often start new conversations by giving the readers a chance to add their own content and opinions. It's the

community aspect and the interaction that makes a difference. [says Pete Brown, author

of three beer books and a popular beer blog, when comparing blogging to print journalism. Blogging is] becoming something quite different from traditional print media, even if it looks similar at first glance. Not better or worse, just different. To use it well, you have to understand that it's two-way rather than broadcast.¹⁰

Bloggers are reporting back from the front line on good places to go and good beers to drink: they are the new opinion makers - like Michael was 30 years ago - just now it's a multi-voiced community of passionate people who are increasingly seen as important to the industry and beyond. As Adrian Tierney-Jones explains, blogging

is probably the most exciting development in beer writing since Michael Jackson decided to categorise the world of beer and search the world. We have a multiplicity of voices about beer, imagine the world of beer blogging as a radio broadcast band on which you can find all manner of channels.

As beer is the most social drink in the world - something which can be enjoyed with friends for hours and the drinker can still walk and talk after - it makes sense that the integration to work with social media would be a simple one, where at its very core the aim of social media is to engage people in conversation.

Twitter is where the most immediate beer action is. Twitter is a constantly-updating mix of blogging and the instant message,

with pictures and videos, links to websites and general conversation, where users 'follow' others to see what they are saying. It's the fastest-moving media where news can break instantly and spread worldwide in minutes. Twitter has opened up a dialogue between people around the world and beer is a popular topic, whether it's someone casually talking about what they're drinking in the pub or a dedicated beer-focused account. Twitter works so well with beer because people can have conversations with others around the world in an instant. People are using it to say what they are drinking or where they have been, they are linking to blog posts they've written or to interesting news stories, they are asking questions and getting answers: it's all about conversations.

Lee Williams, a beer blogger and prominent twitter-user with his *Hoptopia*¹¹ site, explains that there is an important link between drinker and brewer:

Twitter allows beer lovers to converse with and ask questions of the breweries that make the beer they enjoy or are simply curious about - this relationship for both parties is priceless.

This relationship has the ability to bring makers and consumers closer together which is a real benefit of new media as it adds the human touch and personality to brands, bringing them into the real world. Along the same principle, breweries can tell their followers what they are brewing,

while pubs can let customers know what's on at the bar that day, proving to be valuable (and free) marketing tools.

The importance of Twitter is the immediacy of the communication and the way that people can talk freely and easily, either engaging actively by replying or just passively by reading. It's a relatively new social media (launching in 2007) so users are still learning about the best ways of utilising it but it's very encouraging to see so many daily beer conversations occurring online in this way.

Pass the writing and move into the audio-visuals and beer is still a popular topic. Michael was the first person to talk about beer passionately into camera, explaining taste and style effortlessly in *The Beer Hunter* television shows. The series screened in 1989-90 but there was only ever six episodes produced, all of which are now available to view online.

'We talked frequently of doing another Beer Hunter series,' says John Richards who is putting 70 hours worth of footage together into a feature length documentary about Michael,

and [Michael] lamented the fact that he wasn't able to get any traction with that. I proposed that with advances in online video, we could probably shoot a new season and distribute it very successfully as a digital media.

Sadly, the chance never came. With the feature

the intent is to trace Michael's history and contributions in the context of the evolution of craft beer,

John explains.

Many craft beer lovers are still unaware that Michael's writing and television series had a huge impact on craft beer's direction.

As for the film's primary market, John says:

The beer blogosphere and online community are ultimately the audience, and reaching them through the web is a no-brainer. We can really focus on our core audience that way.

Away from Michael and there are countless video beer reviews on the internet where people have recorded themselves drinking a beer and explaining what it's like. Some of these are on video sharing sites such as YouTube while others are embedded into blogs and websites, adding an extra element of personality to sites. Some reviewers sit in their homes while some are out on location shooting videos while visiting bars and breweries, talking to others, showing pints and pubs around the world.

Zak Avery was one of the first British beer writers to start recording videos and he did so because 'it made the website more rooted in the real world, suddenly having the person behind the website talking to you.'¹² Chad Polenz¹³ is a prominent YouTube beer reviewer with

over 1,100 channel subscribers tuning in to his 400-plus videos.

While I'm a huge supporter of the written word, there are some things that can be done more effectively via video, like beer-reviewing, [says Chad.] I think it's because theviewer gets a much more authentic experience of what a beer looks, smells and tastes like based on what they see and hear in the video as well as the reviewer's body language.

These videos are building upon what *The Beer Hunter* series no doubt started and aim to show others what the colourful world of beer really looks like.

One of the great aspects of new media is how the different channels can work together and cross-reference. For example, it's possible to film a video and post it to YouTube, this video can then be embedded into a blog post and the blog post can then be linked to social media (Twitter and Facebook - a growing number of people are also using Facebook for linking to their beer writing). They work seamlessly together, each helping to promote the piece and offer it to different audiences. Blogs and videos provide the more complete and in-depth content, but Twitter is equally valid as a way of communicating about beer given that it is a great way of passing things on to other people, dropping the message at their fingertips.

The two main worldwide beer community websites, *RateBeer* and *BeerAdvocate*,

are important focal points, getting over 15,000,000 page views a month between them.¹⁴ The sites enable people to drink a beer, assign scores to a number of categories (aroma, taste, etc) and give tasting notes (*RateBeer* has over 2,500,000 ratings on 100,000 listed beers). It's also possible to 'rate' pubs, bars and beer stores, mapping out the best places to buy beer around the world, compiled from individuals' opinions. The language used in these ratings along with the separation of beers into style and the motivation to find and drink new beers was all pioneered by Michael, who has influenced many others to do the same. Josh Oakes, a *RateBeer* editor, explains Michael's influence on him and on *RateBeer*:

After getting my first *Pocket Guide* in 1994, I began a fairly serious exploration of beer. It wasn't enough to try lots of beer, I had to be a beer hunter as well. That is the attitude that has always prevailed at *RateBeer* since the time I started as editor. Our global outlook can be traced directly back to the way that Jackson instilled a global outlook in me. When he wrote about finding a cask-conditioned stout in Sri Lanka, that taught me that hunting beer means finding beer. Now *RateBeer* has information on the most obscure beers from the most obscure corners of the world ... [Michael] preached the virtues of the global beer hunt and I took that to heart.

Michael's books are not just a resource of world beer, they are also treasure maps, opening a new world for beer drinkers to search:

beer rating itself is beer hunting, [says Joe Tucker, Executive Director of *RateBeer*.] I think that in terms of concept and design, we [at *RateBeer*] did what we could to cater to the passion defined and spread by Michael [where the fact that the site categorises beers into styles] has as much or more to do with Michael Jackson than any other influence.

The community aspect of *RateBeer* and *BeerAdvocate*, along with *Beer in the Evening* and *Beer-Pages*, really comes alive in the forums, where drinkers can talk together, build friendships and ask and answer questions, just like a chat at a virtual bar. These sites also act as recommendations from others and can be invaluable, whether it's to a beer newcomer or the experienced drinker. It's similar to how someone going on holiday can check what others have said about the hotel or resort they are staying at to see if it receives good reviews - citizen journalism means everyone can be a critic and a reviewer.

There are some detractors to the online beer community and their main point seems to be that the people updating the pages and forums are predominantly passionate amateurs who may be inaccurate or unbalanced. But does this matter? Are reviews of hotels from holidaymakers less relevant than reviews from travel writers? Is a recipe on a food blog less delicious than one from a cookery book? The truth is that standards actually need to be raised because it's possible to immediately respond to a post which is incorrect, circling it with a virtual

red pen for others to see, this means accuracy is an important aspect to any post and bloggers are doing more and more research into what they write. As all professional beer writers have their own website or blog, these are the sites which tend to drive the most traffic and have the most loyal and regular readers - the best are at the top regardless of the medium. Readers are savvy enough to know when someone is writing something relevant or interesting and it's down to them to choose to read it or not.

The key to new media is that it's user-generated and anyone can be a part of it. Whereas in the old media the communication was a one-way telling of information from a powerful few, now anyone can limitlessly publish their own content and the audience can actively respond and interact. Information is always available, anywhere, within moments, written by people who love beer. 'Everyone who writes about beer does so because they're passionate about it,' explains Pete Brown, 'I think online has given more of those passionate beer lovers a voice and an outlet.' While there will always be a place for books, the virtual channels have given more people a chance to contribute to discussions in a wide variety of ways, it also gives new writers a place to start and an open notepad for others to read. This is the important development of new media. What's exciting is that we are at the beginning of what the online beer scene can be and there will be many more advances to come.

But what would Michael have thought about the influx of people communicating about beer on the internet? Would he have cowered away from reading the amateur blogs or would he have revelled in seeing so many voices wishing to talk about beer? Would he have spent a few minutes each morning reading them to see the latest updates, to see what people are drinking? Would he sit down in the evening with a beer and watch a few YouTube reviews? Would he update Twitter ('Just had lunch with Father Theodor') or listen to podcasts through his iPhone? What if these technologies were available ten years ago - how would Michael have used them?

It seems only right to give Michael some of the last words, which shows his humour and humility. In his article 'Why I would rather be in Philadelphia', which is available online, he writes:

If I were for even a split second remembered for *The Beer Hunter*, I should smile in the hereafter as I shared a refreshing Duvel with my new drinking buddies. I have entertained many ambitions over the years, beginning at the age of 12 with a desire to get my hand inside Sharon Madelewski's blouse and extending to notions of captaining Great Britain at Rugby League, becoming Prime Minister, bringing about an end to racism, poverty and war, and winning the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Apart from the first, achieved in a somewhat graceless grope, and not especially well received, these intentions have eluded me.

Perhaps I have in the process become almost an adult. Why else would I feel embarrassed when people at book-signings say gratifying but excessive things to me? 'Thanks for doing what you do.' 'Thanks for turning the United States on to good beer.' 'Thanks for your *Pocket Guide* - we had a great holiday in Belgium.' (Surprisingly often, the latter turns out to have been a honeymoon). 'Thanks for changing our lives'.¹⁵

After Michael's death the Brewers Association dedicated a page of their website to tributes from beer fans. It's a powerful glimpse at the legacy Michael left, populated with memories and stories, from those who knew him and those who didn't. On 30 September 2007, a toast was organised for Michael Jackson. Arranged on the internet, this toast quickly spread worldwide and at the determined time drinkers raised their glass and said 'cheers' to Michael. This wasn't cheers for the *last time*, it was cheers for the *next time*, and there will be many more in the years to come that will find Michael's work and raise their glasses and say thank you.

Michael did more than any other to have beer proliferate positively in books and old media but it was only popularised to a certain threshold, and as *The Beer Hunter* series finished it chimed unfortunately with increasingly anti-social stories about beer. Fast-forward 20 years and there are no regular columns in national press and no regular, positive mentions on television. That's where the internet comes in. It's the place away from brew-

eries and bars where people can read, write and learn about beer, discovering new brews and places around the world. This is the essence of Michael's work and his influence has blossomed online, where beer appreciation is growing daily, always attracting new drinkers and writers ready for their next great beer. And who knows, when this new appreciation peaks online, maybe it'll find a regular place in old media once more.

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