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Behind the data



Blogging about science

JUDITH KAMALSKI

Just five years ago, there were only a handful of science blogs in English, now there are thousands. According to Adam Bly from [Science Blogs](#) (Seed Media Group), around 33% of scientists are now using blogs for writing, reading or as a lab notebook.

Launched in 2006, [Science Blogs](#) has seen unique visitors per month rise from 200,000 to 2.5 million in just three years. Today, it publishes 150 blogs from around the world written by professional science researchers and science journalists in different languages.

Reaching out

While some, like Inna Kouper at the School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University, believe science blogs rarely reach the non-scientist community, even though they should (3), others, like science blogger [Janet Stemwedel](#), are proving that they can attract non-scientists as well as their peers.

Dr Isis, who writes the "[On Becoming a Domestic and Laboratory Goddess](#)" blog comments: "For me, I know that a single blog will be read by many thousands more non-scientists than any original scientific article I publish in a peer-reviewed journal". (4)

[Drugmonkey](#) adds that among a science blog's lay audience, a number could be made up of scientists reading about specialties other than their own, making them lay people in that particular field (4).

Tight communities

According to Christina Pikas, a doctoral student at the University of Maryland College of Information Studies who performed a cluster analysis on science blogs, communities generally form within scientific disciplines. However, those authored by female scientists tend to attract a more interdisciplinary readership (2).

Pikas comments: "When I reviewed these blogs, I found that they are more likely to have anonymous or pseudonymous authors, and often discuss work-life issues, including gender issues. In the blogosphere in general, there are few blogs that are very heavily read and linked-to; the majority have just a few readers, exhibiting the 'long-tail' phenomenon. However, within the 'female' community, the blogs have almost the same number of readers, they all link to each other, and they all comment on each other's blogs. It's more evenly distributed. More research is needed to understand precisely why this

What is science blogging?

A science blog is an online article written either by a scientist or written about science or being a scientist. According to Adam Goldstein: "A weblog ('blog') is a publication on the World Wide Web in which brief entries are displayed in date order, much like a diary or journal." (1) Christina Pikas defines science blogs as, "blogs maintained by scientists that deal with any aspect of being a scientist, or blogs about scientific topics by non-scientists" (2). According to Bora Zivkovic, better known as Coturnix, author of "[A Blog Around The Clock](#)", "most are really science blogs – covering science in every, or almost every, post."

is, but it does seem to be a more supportive community than some of the others."

Blogs by female scientists tend to have a lot of links and short paths to other nodes in the network (1). Pikas explains: "The links among the blogs are formed when one blogger comments on another blogger's post or when one blogger includes a link to another blog in his or her blogroll. Each blog is a 'node' or actor in the network. A path traces the connections between nodes or actors. If blog A links to blog B, then there is a direct connection. If blog B links to blog C, then A can get to C through two hops on the path. If the network is densely connected, there are multiple ways you can trace a path from one node to another, and you don't have to make many hops to get from one blog to another."

A personal touch

Adam Goldstein, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Iona College, notes that blogs may not be the best type of source for systematic and authoritative information. (1) Kouper agrees, noting that, "this way, the news becomes more entertaining, thereby making it difficult to rely on this form of reporting as a source of accurate information." (3)

For bloggers, this is a personal expression that illustrates science engagement more than objective authoritative information. Many science blogs have different categories in which they classify their posts. Some can be about more personal topics and others on more research-oriented themes.

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Pikas says: "Mixing various posts is useful in public communication because it reinforces the point that scientists are real people with real lives." And then there are blogs where the boundary between personal and scientific can be blurred: **Cognitive Daily**, which sadly stopped in January 2010, featured "Casual Fridays", in which light-hearted surveys and experiments were conducted with the help of readers.

Punch line

Coturnix hits the nail on the head when he says that a science blog's success is down to "the personality of the owner, combined with her/his expertise, that draws in the audience". Elements that he lists as common in a successful blog are humor, juicy language and strong opinions.

David Crotty blogs on **The Scholarly Kitchen** that, "the best blogs (not just science blogs) are written with passion and personality". (6)

Pikas adds: "A good blog is useful to either its owner, its readers, or both. [...] When I asked scientists about the blogs they read, they told me that they enjoy good writing, a sense of hu-

mor, and good science. There is no right answer for what should be on a science blog."

In general, it is a combination of the blogger's personality and the content on the blog that makes for a great read and successful blog. Science blogs are a great source of information... and a true must-read.

Useful blogs:

Science Blogs

"A Blog Around The Clock", Coturnix

"Adventures in Ethics and Science", Janet Stemwedel

"On Becoming a Domestic and Laboratory Goddess", Dr Isis

"The Scholarly Kitchen"

References:

- [1] Goldstein, A. (2009) "Blogging Evolution", *Evolution: Education and Outreach*, vol. 2, issue 3, pp. 548-559.
- [2] Pikas, C. (2008) "Detecting Communities in Science Blogs." *Fourth IEEE International Conference on eScience*.
- [3] Kouper, I. (2010) "Science Blogs and public engagement with science: practices, challenges, and opportunities". *Journal of Science Communication*, vol. 9, issue 1.
- [4] Dr Isis (March 2010) "Science blogs and public engagement with science: practices, challenges, and talking out of your ass".
- [5] Drugmonkey (March 2010) "When scientist audience is from another field it is still 'outreach'".
- [6] Crotty, D. (March 2010) "Science Blogging as a Public Outreach Tool — Unfulfilled Potential or Unrealistic Expectation?" *The Scholarly Kitchen*.