

“You Started a What?” Blogging and More for Science Editors and Others

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In July 2005, *The Blog Herald* reported that there were more than 70 million blogs.¹ That number broke down to anywhere from 15 million to 30 million in the United States alone, with South Korea boasting 15 million and Japan, 4 million. In November 2008, just 3 years later, the About Us page of blog index and search engine Technorati (*technorati.com*) reported that the service indexes 112.8 million blogs.²

Why so many blogs? What’s the appeal? And how can writers, editors, and publishers benefit from blogging?

Blogging Basics

A blog, short for weblog, is a frequently updated Web site containing text, images, video, and/or sound that generally displays content in reverse chronological order (newest material at the top) and often encourages an interactive experience by allowing readers to comment on posted material. Although the blog format was originally popular for online diaries, blogging can extend far beyond personal musings—to business, religion, politics, and more.

In the *Time* article “How Many Blogs Does the World Need?”³ author Michael Kinsley observed that blogging is “a genuinely new literary form, which, at its best, combines the immediacy of talking with the reflectiveness of writing.” But despite blogging’s newness (it’s been around full force for less than 10 years, although some blogs existed earlier) we’ve already reached what Kinsley called “blog gridlock.”

Gridlock indeed. Technorati reports that “there are over 175,000 new blogs (that’s just blogs) every day. Bloggers update their

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blogs regularly to the tune of over 1.6 million posts per day, or over 18 updates a second.”² Why are blogs so popular? Part of it is surely the ease with which anyone can blog. All it takes is signing up for a free account with a service like Google’s Blogger (*www.blogger.com*) or WordPress (*wordpress.com*), and voilà! Just type your content and click “PUBLISH”. If a free service isn’t sufficient for one reason or another, hosting one’s own blog can be simple and inexpensive with low-cost hosting options and a plethora of free and inexpensive open-source and proprietary content-management systems.

Speaking of blogging’s brilliant backend, content-management systems are what make blogging so easy. Bloggers need only type their content into a simple interface, and the system takes care of coding. There are hundreds if not thousands of ready-made templates available for the various blogging systems, so creating an attractive, professional-looking site is a snap, not to mention a cost-effective and empowering solution for businesses and individuals that want to create and maintain their own Web sites. “The free WordPress software makes updating so easy that I actually converted my static Web site to a blog format,” says Anne Wayman, of San Diego, California, a 30+-year freelancing veteran and host of *AboutFreelanceWriting.com*. “I doubt that the casual reader[s] can tell, but I’m sure they’ll appreciate the fresh content and consistent design, which is so much simpler for me to maintain now.”

Not only simple and affordable, blogs are also very search-engine friendly—in part because the content is updated as often as several times a day, and headlines and tags increase content’s “findability”. This can make blogs a major vehicle for promoting a product or service. The community element supported by blog commenting and linking to other sites in the blogosphere encourages “stickiness”—visitors not only come but return again and again—which

makes for extremely appealing advertising space. And we can’t forget novelty: there’s something to be said for the sheer newness of blogging, the coolness factor, the “everybody’s doing it” vibe.

But many of today’s science bloggers began before “everyone” was doing it, like Yali Friedman, author of *Building Biotechnology*, managing editor of the *Journal of Commercial Biotechnology* and manager of *BiotechBlog.com*. “I got my start as the first biotech blogger in 1999,” says Friedman. “The concept of blogs didn’t exist back then, and I was selected to create and manage a Web site on the business of biotechnology ... using a blog-like format. I ran that site for 7 years as it morphed into a blog and was purchased by the *New York Times*, and I recently left to launch my own blog at *BiotechBlog.com*.”

Friedman sees blogs as a means to supplement, not replace, traditional publishing outlets. “I see blogging in biotechnology and the sciences in general as a good adjunct to other activities. There are a lot of great bloggers out there, but most of them have solid résumés aside from their blogging,” he says. “Likewise, blogs are good complements to traditional outlets. Traditional journals have a strong legacy of publishing high-impact, peer-reviewed work that’s best read on paper. Print is not dead! Blogs are better suited for shorter (Web attention spans are short) op-ed or time-sensitive news items.”

Best Practices for Bloggers

Bloggers may define success in any number of ways, but those who are blogging with specific goals in mind will find that tricks of the trade make it easier to reach one’s targets. As in most fields, what some consider blogging best practices others see as unnecessary. That being said, most agree on these recommendations:

1. Post regularly. How frequently one should post is up for constant debate

(five times a day, once a day, once a week, once a month, and so on), but posting *regularly* is a pretty widely recognized best practice. If readers know when to expect new content, they're more likely to visit regularly.

- 2. Allow and respond to comments.** Part of the appeal of blogs is that readers can participate in creating content by commenting on articles and on other readers' remarks. By allowing this discussion and supporting it by jumping in, bloggers can help to build a community around their content.
- 3. Have a brand.** For those who blog for business in particular—to promote a product, service, or company—clear and consistent branding is a must. If you're Coke, for instance, using green block type as a major feature of your design won't be as effective in creating a cohesive presence as using Coke's distinctive script and red and white color scheme. Branding is more than design, though. The language you use, the content you post, and the way you respond to readers are all parts of your brand.
- 4. Be easy to find.** In addition to helping readers to find your blog in the first place through search-engine optimization and simply by being present online, don't forget to make it easy for them to figure out who you are once they're there. A clear "About" page that includes your real name and information about your specialties is a must, as is prominent contact information.

ProBlogger (www.problogger.net), Business and Blogging (www.businessandblogging.com), Copyblogger (www.copyblogger.com), and Men with Pens (menwithpens.ca) are just a few how-to sites with targeted tips to help bloggers to improve their content and their results.

For science bloggers, there's another important "Do" on this list of best practices: Strive for accuracy, and substantiate your claims with research. "When I write about medicine in my own blogs I try to take a skeptical perspective on outlandish medical claims and present the science-

based evidence in an understandable way," says Cambridge, England-based science writer David Bradley, who writes the blog Science Base (www.sciencebase.com). "I just hope that by backing up my claims with peer-reviewed research papers and quotes from the experts, I am doing the wider community some kind of service rather than a disservice."

Another consideration for science bloggers is voice. What if you're not blogging for a company or publication with set style rules? How do you develop a credible blog presence? Hiring a blog copyeditor may be going overboard, but some basic stylistic choices can contribute to the overall image that a blogger wants to portray. For instance, consider using AMA style if you're blogging to build your platform as a medical editor. Trying, as an author's editor, to attract nonnative English speakers? Use a simple tone and straightforward language.

Does blogging, done well, really help freelancers to find work? "Before I started blogging in 2007, I had experience editing for a well-known health site, The Doctor's Guide to the Internet [www.docguide.com], which gave me a bit of recognition online," says Marijke Vroomen-Durning, of Montreal, Quebec, Canada. "When I launched my Web site, MedHealthWriter.com, and my blog [medhealthwriter.blogspot.com], the combination of blogging, editing for a prestigious online resource, and working as a nurse for more than 20 years gave me a huge level of credibility as both a medical writer and a medical editor. I've had people contact me through the blog about editing because of that DocGuide experience." And it doesn't hurt that Vroomen-Durning's blog is the first Google result for the search *nurse writer* or that she's a nominee for Best Canadian Health Blog at the time of this writing.

Vroomen-Durning's example highlights two other blogging best practices: writing outside your own blog or Web site and linking to yourself. "All my blogs have links to my other blogs," says Vroomen-Durning, who writes six blogs on health topics: two for herself, three for a major blog network,

and one for another client. "People may find me just because they're interested in a topic I blog about elsewhere, but if they're interested in hiring me as a writer or editor, they make their way to *MedHealthWriter.com* thanks to links in my bio and elsewhere on my sites." Her various projects give her a lot of visibility online while positioning her as an authority on health topics, and this makes her both findable (see No. 4 above) and attractive to potential clients and employers.

Blogging and Beyond in the Sciences

Whether blogging is considered legitimate journalism depends on whom you ask, but one thing is certain: Blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies are changing the face of publishing and education in big ways.

"I think [blogs] are useful to knit a community together to distribute news items. There is a role for this, but I am not sure blogging is the way to distribute serious scientific knowledge," says Kuan-Teh Jeang, chief of the Molecular Virology Section of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and editor of the journal *Retrovirology*. Jeang uses a blog to promote *Retrovirology* but doesn't consider blogs to be necessarily reliable sources in the sciences. "It really depends on the blogger's qualifications and credibility. There is no one that I know of, other than the *Retrovirology* journal, that I would trust as authoritative on HIV issues. Our blog is really more for community news than for authoritative advice."

Others in the field of science and technology tend to agree. "Although there are good scientific blogs that contain relevant and up-to-date information, I have found that most blogs ... are just chaff, noise, and opinion pieces. This has necessitated the need for Web sites like Fact Check [www.factcheck.org]" says Andrew S I D Lang, professor of mathematics at Oral Roberts University. "The real problem for educators is that the Internet is now the primary source used by students to do research, especially the dreaded Wikipedia. I often find myself having to teach students

Blogging continued

information-literacy skills rather than just content. I foresee the job of the professor becoming more like this in the future: guiding students through information (collection, interpretation, verification, and so on) rather than being the one who distributes information.” [See the May–June 2007 *Science Editor* article “Wiki-what-ia? Approaching Encyclopedia Entries in the Electronic Age”⁴ for more information about Wikipedia.]

The difference between a good science blog and a science blog filled with “noise” seems to be the experience of the author, not the medium itself. “Science blogs by scientists are a great resource and often very authoritative, especially those that focus on the particular field of science in which the blogger specializes. They do tend to be written at the specialist level, at least the ones that I read regularly, and in contrast with traditional reporting tend not to quote from independent experts, or even from the researchers about whose work a particular post is written. So they are serving a different audience,” says Bradley. “Then, of course, there are the science blogs by ex-scientists turned reporter–writer, which often use the more traditional tools of journalism to produce their content and aim at a more general, although scientifically aware, audience.”

It helps blogging’s reputation that major media outlets—such as the *New York Times* (tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com/), *Time* (www.time.com/time/blogs), and *Wired Magazine* (blog.wired.com/wiredscience)—blog about science topics. The American Association for the Advancement of Science operates EurekaAlert! (www.eurekaalert.org), which, although not a blog, is a highly searchable Web site that’s updated daily with new research in 14 scientific, medical, and technical categories. Similarly, the slightly more bloglike Science Daily (www.science-daily.com) publishes dozens of science-, medicine-, and technology-related articles every 3 hours in eight categories and scores of subcategories. Founded in 1995, Science Daily has nearly 45,000 articles in its archives and is very blogger friendly, offering tools to share articles through social

bookmarking sites and even providing a “Blog” button that offers a short summary and link for each article for easy linking and discussion. As more and more authoritative online resources begin to blog and imitate the blog format, blogging’s credibility grows.

To determine the value of a science blog, Bradley said, “lay readers have to ask themselves the same question [they ask] about any of the science they read in the mainstream media. This is critical when you’re talking about medical information. If a blog or magazine is positing a specific stance on the use of a drug therapy or [alternative] medicine, for instance, how is the lay reader to know what is and is not valid?” Skeptical reading is a must, Bradley asserted.

BRIO Public Relations Director Sara Lien often targets blogs to promote scientific books that she represents. “I used to consider print to be better than blogs. I was raised before the Internet, so I always considered it more valid and believable. However, as the Internet matures, bloggers are becoming more knowledgeable. Many science bloggers double as print journalists, so their opinion carries that weight as well,” Lien says. “Although bloggers are dangerous because there is no editor, getting bloggers to review a book puts it in front of eyeballs, and the most valid blogs are read by people in most of the traditional mass media. So my goal is to have traditional media people read the blog and gain an interest in my client.”

To find reputable science bloggers, Lien taps into such organizations as the National Association of Science Writers and freelance-writer databases. “You read a lot of their entries and look at publications they write for before sending a pitch,” she says.

Nature Publishing Group (NPG), which produces the weekly journal *Nature*, publishes 17 blogs by NPG staffers (blogs.nature.com) that vary in focus as widely as chemistry, genetics, neuroscience, climate change, molecular systems biology, and the peer-review process. Beyond blogging, NPG hosts the Nature Network (network.nature.com), a social networking Web site for scientists. NPG is also venturing into other Web 2.0 technologies, including the free online virtual world Second Life (www.secondlife.com).

Some Recommended Blogs

Recommended by Andrew S I D Lang, professor of mathematics, Oral Roberts University:

- Nascent - blogs.nature.com/wpl/nascent
- Useful chemistry - usefulchem.blogspot.com
- Broader perspective - futurememes.blogspot.com

Other science blogs that you may enjoy:

- Eye on DNA - www.eyeonDNA.com
- Genetics and health - www.geneticsandhealth.com
- Healthbolt - www.healthbolt.net
- HEALTH’Sass - healthsass.blogspot.com

nature.com), a social networking Web site for scientists. NPG is also venturing into other Web 2.0 technologies, including the free online virtual world Second Life (www.secondlife.com).

“Three buzzwords come up during most conversations among educators using Second Life: *immersion*, *visualization*, and *collaboration*. These words apply equally well to science communication and are being demonstrated effectively by Second Life science-communication pioneers, such as the British journal *Nature* and the American Chemical Society,” says Lang. “I have used Second Life for chemistry visualization in collaboration with Jean-Claude Bradley, of Drexel. We have created several tools that allow both researchers and students to simulate docking in Second Life, create life-size molecules by just ‘speaking’ the molecule’s identifier to a ‘molecule rezzer’, view and interact with various spectra, and so on. I also teach several lessons for my science and science-fiction class in Second Life.”

Scientific blogging can also support business while increasing readers’ knowledge, as demonstrated by the online dating and relationship service (eHarmony.com).

eHarmony Labs is the company's relationship-research facility, and its Hot Science Blog (www.eharmony.com/labs/blog) shares research in easy-to-understand language through twice-monthly updates. "We use the blog as one of our avenues to both announce and describe eHarmony research that has been accepted or published in scientific journals," says Gian Gonzaga, senior research scientist at eHarmony. "We also review and summarize information from non-eHarmony sources that cover[s] general topics in the relationship-science field. We talk about relevant new publications and organizations that study relationship research, and we comment on what's reported in the press. . . . We often comment on the theoretical background and the general science behind our research on the blog, but we do not specifically discuss the proprietary elements."

According to Gonzaga, the blog's readers find it interesting and authoritative.

"Earlier this year, we sought feedback on the content of the blog from a group of academic researchers, including social psychologists and relationship researchers. Of the 119 participants who responded, 69% were interested in the content of the blog," says Gonzaga. "We also believe that the blog has value to students and others interested in learning about relationships. We have been told by at least one professor that students are required to read the blog as part of the classroom exercises."

From blogs and online encyclopedias to virtual reality, the face of scientific publishing is changing rapidly. The successful writers, editors, and publishers will be the ones who can combine the best of the online and offline offerings into an integrated model that helps them to reach readers, authors, and clients both online and offline while keeping pace with the next big thing. 

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