

Comment

To blog or not to blog, not a real choice there...

Elisabetta Tola

Science blogging is not the future anymore, it is the present. In the last few years there has been a real explosion of the number of scientists populating the blogosphere, at any level, from undergraduate to senior researchers, who have decided to take advantage of this kind of medium to communicate, informally, their science to other colleagues, to other scientists in different fields and to the general public. Why should a scientist use this medium? A much more logical question is, these days, exactly the opposite one. Why shall a scientist choose not to use this medium?

Within the informal ways to communicate science, like lab meetings, informal meetings, e-mails, research days, and so on, blogs have the incomparable advantage to bring the scientist out of his/her institution and in a more universal dimension. Well, science has always been an international activity, and the scientific community has always been one that is not particularly bound to any local dimension. However, science communication, even at an informal level, has mostly been done within small circles of colleagues, based on personal contacts and on already established collaborations.

Blogs dramatically change the order of magnitude of this informal conversation between scientists. And open it to non specialists and to anyone interested in the field, even if it is someone not belonging to any scientific community. The advantages of this medium are so self evident, in terms of the possibility of gaining feedback on one's work and approaches, of finding new solutions and ideas, of meeting new colleagues and other scientists who might be contributing to the development of one's research, of starting new collaborations, even of finding new positions, that it is really difficult to imagine why a scientist, especially a young one at the beginning of her own career, should not feel like entering this collective conversation. The ability to get rapid feedback and change approach or correcting a biased interpretations of data and facts is another major plus of blogging.

In the US, many scientists started blogging a good while ago. And some of the bloggers gave so much contribution to science discussion, that some media decided to organise platforms to make it easier for any willing scientist to enter the blogosphere. So, at the beginning of 2006, Seed Media group started off *ScienceBlogs.com* (*SB*). Hosting, at the time of writing, more than 70 blogs, *SB* had an incomparable advantage over other similar initiatives. Being one of the first to be launched, it soon became the place where some already well known US bloggers ended up. Which means that there was, from the start, a good traffic, and that the conversation between bloggers and with the readers was already going even from the very initial phase.

As it defines itself, "ScienceBlogs is a digital science salon featuring the leading bloggers from a wide array of scientific disciplines." Not only scientists, then, but also science writers and journalists. Like Carl Zimmer, columnist of *The New York Times* and other magazines and Chris Mooney, another quite well known *free lance* science writer. The presence of both scientists and journalists helps improving the way science is discussed and makes it accessible to non specialists while keeping it up to date with the last findings. But also looks after issues like conflicts of interest in science and health and political/economical aspects which very often are overlooked by scientists although they are of high interest for the public. The intensity of the conversation is well represented by the numbers: at the end of may 2008, *SB* hosted more than 68.000 posts and over 816.000 comments. The blogs belonging to *SB* deal with life sciences, physical sciences, medicine, brain and neuroscience, environment but also with humanities, education, politics, technology. The homepage displays, among other features, the most recent posts listed per category, a gallery of photos, all the blogs listed in a banner on the left, a Top five of readers' pick and of most active bloggers and a highlight phrase from one of the recent posts. An interested blogger, who wishes to join *SB*, will have to mail Seed Media group to give information on the blog he wants to open.

A particular point of strength in *SB* is the fact that many of the bloggers were already connected in a sort of informal network, since they had been active for long time before *SB* started off. This gives the network a feeling and a flavour of something already well developed, of an interesting community to join in, of a group of people who are exploiting the full potential of this tool. And who are also discussing things between each other, welcoming new comers and making the conversation really interdisciplinary.

SB gives us the opportunity to highlight another important positive aspect of blogging for scientists as well as for non scientists. As a matter of fact, blogs can work as a very effective source of novel information for scientists themselves and not only for the general public. Nowadays, in fact, science is becoming more and more interdisciplinary and the possibility for one single scientist to keep up to date with different subjects, given the amount of scientific production and papers, is actually quite scarce. So, using selected blogs which act as filter and point out to the most interesting scientific ideas that are published in different journals can be a very efficient way to keep up to date with what's going on in different fields. In this way, specialised blogs allow a scientist to have a quick overview of news, ideas, discussions over unfamiliar scientific subjects. As an example, chronobiologist Bora Zivkovic, a very active *SB* blogger as well as online community manager at PLoS-ONE posts regularly his *Science daily* picks on his '[A blog around the clock](#)'. At the same way, Greta Munger, Professor of Psychology at Davidson College, and her husband Dave Munger, co-founder and president of [ResearchBlogging.org](#) and a writer, report 'nearly every day on fascinating peer-reviewed developments in cognition from the most respected scientists in the field' on their [Cognitive daily](#) blog, which features a weekly podcast as well.

Quite different, in terms of the way it was born and has been developing, is the British [Nature Network](#) (*NN*). Launched in 2007, the *NN* is more explicitly addressed to scientists. Its main objective is to set a global stage, a 'online meeting place for you and fellow scientists to gather, talk and find out about the latest scientific news and events.' Brought by the Nature publishing group, the *NN* has a small disadvantage compared to *SB*. It does not result from the coming together of already active bloggers, but it is promoted by the British publisher based on the concept that 'the web is a powerful medium not just for disseminating scientific information, but also for building communities and providing an interactive forum for the exchange of ideas.' The main difficulty is probably the fact that *NN* is trying to build up a community from the start which means that the lag time needed to see activity and traffic on the network is definitely longer than in the previous case. However, there are some original features of the *NN* which make it a very interesting experiment. *NN* is not simply an aggregator of blogs. Rather, it is a real online community. The platforms has been designed so to favour not only individual blogs but also to build up discussion groups. Bloggers are asked to update their own blog but also to join a group of other scientists with similar interests or to form a new group. Each group has a forum to discuss things, a tool that makes a collective conversation easier than a blog kept by an individual, where others can only comment the posts. For instance, there are *NN* groups based on a geographical basis, like the newly born *NN* Italy group, and other based on a common scientific interest, like the Molecular biology or Stem cells ones. Finally, some groups reflect other type of interest: there is a group which reunites PhD students and there is a pretty fancy one which discusses the issue of Citations in science (how should they be used, which one to pick, and so on). At the time of writing, the impression is that *NN* has still a good bit of way to go before it becomes a vibrant online community, but the interesting thing is that young scientists are using it, more and more, since they probably see it as a tool to join their peers but also to improve their chances of visibility. Which is one of the reasons behind blogging. *NN* is also promoting a new idea: that of creating local hubs. At the moment, only London and Boston local hubs are active, but there might be few more in the pipeline coming out soon. What a local hub should be doing is creating a real and not only virtual community, well connected to a real place. Each local hub has an editor, and features news, events and jobs which are based in the city-hub. At the moment, the London and Boston hubs are quite active. Hopefully, other hubs will have the same success.

Besides the science blogs networks (and here we gave only two examples, although they are probably amongst the most known ones), there are naturally new blogs started by scientists and science writers everyday. However, one of the problems faced by newcomers, in a more and more crowded blogosphere, is how to gain visibility and how to enter the conversation. One of the main problems, in fact, is not receiving any comments to one's own posts, and therefore playing a *solitaire*. There are many ways to build one's presence and visibility. One system is joining discussion blogs which allow

interesting comments and posts to be much more visible and therefore to redirect readers to one's blog. One example is ResearchBlogging.org (*RB*), a blog which aggregates only posts on peer reviewed research. It works like this: bloggers registered on this site, who are often experts scientists, write a post on some published research in their own blogs. Their posts include a snippet of code that notifies *RB* and also create a properly formatted research citation for their blog. In this way, *RB* acts as an aggregator, scanning registered blogs for interesting posts on published research, and then the member bloggers evaluate the quality of the posts. If an interesting review is posted on *RB* it will have greater visibility and most likely other bloggers will start connecting to it and conversating with the author.

Another way to gain visibility and to enter a community of bloggers, is to join a Carnival, a sort of informal blog-magazine focused on a specific topic which has an editor and contributions from many bloggers on that same topic. Each contribution is basically an interesting post one has written on his own blog and that he has decided to submit to the editor of the Carnival. In this way, it is easier to get an overview of the blogging activity on that specific subject, to gain visibility within the community of bloggers dealing with the same topic and to start a conversation with them.

Blogging is a very interesting way of interaction and communication between people belonging to different areas and communities. However, as we are social beings, there is always a moment when we like to log out and get to the real world. This is true for scientists as well. That is why, in recent times, a number of events have been organised in order to facilitate bloggers' encounters. Scienceblogging conferences have been held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, organised by a group of very proactive bloggers, like Bora Zivkovic and Anton Zuicker. A scienceblogging conference is due in London next September. These conferences become an invaluable opportunity to meet in person the people one has been blogging with in the past months and years. To continue the conversation, to improve it, to consolidate a collaboration or to start a new project. But even these conferences are quite different from traditional ones. Because people arrive there having already worked together, having discussed things, having started a conversation. The conference then serves the purpose to have people directly knowing each other beyond their virtual relationships so to strengthen their ability to cooperate, both at a personal and at global level, and to continue feeding a collective intellectual discourse.

Author

Journalist and science communicator, Elisabetta Tola lives in Bologna. In 1994, she graduated in Agricultural Sciences at the University of Padua. In 2000, she earns a PhD in Environmental Microbiology at the University of Cork, in Ireland and, in 2004, a Master's Degree in Science Communication at SISSA in Trieste. Since 1999, she has been conducting radio programs on "Città del capo radio metropolitana" a popular radio network in Bologna. In particular, since October 2004, she has been producing and presenting for the same radio PiGreco Party, a weekly program on science and society. Since January 2005, she is one of the presenters of Radio3scienza, a daily scientific program by Rai radio 3. She also works with the press and cooperates with online magazines. Furthermore, she participates as a moderator and speaker in a number of initiatives performed before an audience. In 2006, together with other members, she founds formicablu srl, a company which "explores the world of research and science communication in the city of Bologna and "its surroundings", providing services for newspapers, TV and radio, multimedia products and, on the web, audiovisual, radio-web and podcast products. E-mail: eli@formicablu.it.