

Conference Blogging: Interview with Alex Knoll

Martin Fenner, Gobbledygook

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Blogging is a great way to report from a scientific conference. This could be done either with regular blog posts written in the evening or after the conference, and/or live-blogging using tools such as Friendfeed or Twitter. One or more blogging scientists can not only add a unique perspective to the reports about a conference, but for smaller conferences blogging might be the only way to learn more about a conference you were unable to attend in person.

Conference blogging (particularly live-blogging) basically requires four things:

- a wireless network,
- a computer or mobile phone with a full battery,
- a hashtag (and other tools to find the conference blog posts), and
- a blogging policy by the conference organizers.

Wireless networks are now commonplace, but enough battery power (or power outlets that conference participants can use) can be difficult. A hashtag such as `#solo09` for Science Online London is essential for live-blogging using Twitter.

The big problem is the blogging policy, or rather that there usually is a policy only for traditional media, but not for blogging. The blogging from the Cold Spring Harbor Biology of Genomes meeting in May by Daniel MacArthur started a very helpful discussion about blogging policies. It is impossible to write anything specific about a conference – and that’s the stuff that is most interesting – without a permission from the conference organizer and speaker. This is best done before the conference has started. A July Nature editorial argues that an opt-out policy, where everything can be blogged about unless the speaker or poster presenter specifically says so, is a reasonable alternative.

The organizers of the Annual Meeting of the German Genetics Society that took place two weeks ago in Cologne did this right. Not only did they invite Alex Knoll to become the official conference blogger, but they also put up a prominent link to his blog posts on the conference homepage, and they asked every speaker before the conference whether Alex would be allowed to blog about their talks. Because his blog on scienceblogs.de (Alles was lebt) is in German, he decided to put up his blog posts here. I’ve asked him a few questions about this experience.

1. Did you have fun being the official blogger for the German Genetics Society Meeting?

This conference blogging job was a first for me in many ways. I usually blog in German, so I wasn't sure if I would be able to bring more than my dry, scientific English. I also knew beforehand that there would be no theme, that the meeting was a general one. I would have at least to give the impression of having understood the basics of the talks. There would be no flitting about from talk to talk, I wanted to get whole sessions without interruption.

But on the other hand, I also got to know lots of people, many more than I would have as a lowly PhD student. I attended a conference I almost certainly would not have without the invitation to come and blog.

And, as any other (science)blogger will tell you, blogging is a labour of love (don't stab me in the back now!). So yes, I had a great time!

2. Blogging about the conference must have been a lot of work!

About as much as I expected. I was frantically typing away at my little netbook keyboard during the talks to take notes, and used any spare time to put together the posts. So I did not have as easy a time as regular conference attendees. No problem, I came to do a job!

3. Did you meet any other science bloggers at the conference?

As far as I'm aware, I was the only blogger attending, and also the only one tweeting from the sessions (no worries, no unpublished data got out that route).

4. What was the feedback from the speakers? What was your experience getting permissions from speakers to blog about their sessions?

I got the whole range. From the really open "Go ahead! Write what you want, put it online. I'll talk about some unpublished stuff as well, but I don't mind" to some who are not interested in getting their work out into a blog at all. Great news for the conference blogging crowd: the balance was tipped more to the pro side! Most of the speakers came out somewhere in between those two sides, probably being a bit cautious about that whole strange blogging stuff. But I got mostly positive feedback from them, and I believe the next blogger will have an easier time when blogging about their talks!

5. What tips would you give a conference organizer who wants to promote blogging?

They should make clear from the start if blogging about the talks is generally OK. That doesn't mean all of the speakers have to allow blogging about their talk, but an official position will help everyone involved. You also don't need to

have an official blogger, but especially at smaller meetings asking someone to blog beforehand is probably the only chance to get a blogger there at all.

I also have advice for speakers: Start your talk by telling your audience if blogging about it is OK! If a part of your talk is unpublished, tell them that as well. Or put an icon on your slides to indicate which is good to blog about, for example as Daniel MacArthur from the Genetic Future blog has proposed. If bloggers know beforehand if and what part of the talk is good to go, they will be more willing to take notes in earnest!

Now that my guest posting here at Martin's blog comes to an end, I would like to leave you with one of the last impressions, a rather lucky shot of Cologne Cathedral I took while leaving. Many thanks to Martin for hosting this conference blog!