

Why do we blog and other important questions, answered by 34 science bloggers

Martin Fenner, Gobbledygook

November 30, 2008

What started out as a few questions to science bloggers in the Nature Network Bloggers Forum, has turned into a collection of more than 30 blog posts not limited to Nature Network (big thanks to Bora and others for spreading the word). The following science bloggers answered a set of 10 questions about their blogging (roughly in chronological order):

- Henry Gee
- Eva Amsen
- Steffi Suhr
- Stephen Curry
- Maxine Clarke
- Martin Fenner
- Bora Zivkovic
- Clare Dudman
- T. Ryan Gregory
- Massimo Pinto (and another post in Italian)
- Mike Haubrich
- Larry Moran
- John Wilkins
- Kristi Vogel
- Paolo Nuin
- Heather Etchevers
- Lee Turnpenny
- Ricardo Vidal
- Bob O'Hara
- Deepak Singh
- Frank Norman
- Jim Hardy
- Andrew Perry
- Pedro Beltrao
- Shirley Wu
- Angelos Markos
- Thomas Soderqvist

- Sandy Gautam
- Duncan Hull
- John Dupuis
- Mike Fowler
- Erika Cule
- Viktor Po
- Richard Grant
- Ed Yong
- GrrlScientist
- Sally Church

Please contact me if I missed a blog post.

Reading these blog posts is not only interesting and entertaining, but probably also a very good introduction to the current state of science blogging. Below is a personal summary of some of the answers. Oh, the best title was probably from Frank Norman: La meme chose.

1. What is your blog about?

Most bloggers seem to write about many different science-related topics. And only a minority about the actual science they are doing. Some bloggers gave more specific answers:

- My blog is about science, in particular evolution and genomes. (T. Ryan Gregory)
- It's a sort of a window of transparency over a weird scientific environment, the Italian science jobs and funding market. (Massimo Pinto)
- Basically the philosophical implications of science. (John Wilkins)
- Anything related to Biotechnology in Frederick County, MD. (Jim Hardy)
- The general theme is how we can bring the worlds of information technology and the life sciences together. (Deepak Singh)
- I am trying to put the people behind the science into the spotlight: the technicians, operational support, science management and others. (Steffi Suhr)
- We write about making sense of medicine and medical science in museums. (Thomas Soderqvist)
- Ostensibly about theoretical population biology. (Mike Fowler)
- I am interested in how the internet is changing the way we publish and communicate science. (me)

2. What will you never write about?

Several people mentioned that they would not give out personal information about other people, or comment directly on what's going on in their institution/company. Most people also avoid to talk religious beliefs or politics. Confidential information, including unreleased papers, was mentioned several

times. The release of calcium from intracellular stores is another topic that several people would never blog about. Also:

- Only write about things I actually understand. (Ed Yong)
- I will never ask anyone to give me money via this blog. (Maxine Clarke)
- I hope that I will not have to write blog posts that are evaluated, measured and put on a resumé. (me)

3. Have you ever considered leaving science?

Several people said something similar to Bora Zivkovic: Leaving research – yes, I already did that. Leaving science – never.

4. What would you do instead?

Some interesting answers. And a science background would be helpful in most of the jobs:

- Zookeeper, or an animal trainer in a circus (Bora Zivkovic)
- Jazz trumpeteer (Massimo Pinto)
- I'd live on a beach somewhere, just fishing all day (Jim Hardy)
- Own a used book store (John Dupuis)
- I'd try my best to get a job in video game development (Andrew Perry)
- Playing football for England (Sally Church)
- Tend olive trees in Greece (Duncan Hull)
- Yoga instructor (Erika Cule)
- Graphic designer (Ricardo Vidal)
- Write very bad science fiction (John Wilkins)

5. What do you think will science blogging be like in 5 years?

This was a difficult question that some didn't answer. Larry Moran said: pretty much the same as it is now. T. Ryan Gregory thinks that more professional researchers will join the blogosphere as this becomes socially acceptable. Andrew Perry thinks that research groups will be tied together more and more by their blogs. Eva Amsen thinks that there will be so many science blogs that we have to specialize. And I wrote that some science bloggers will be able to make enough money to earn a living from it.

6. What is the most extraordinary thing that happened to you because of blogging?

Thomas Soderqvist said that there is no the most extraordinary thing. But I hadn't expected to get so many interesting contacts with colleagues around the world. Many people (including myself) had similar answers. Going to SciFoo is certainly an extraordinary thing an SciFoo invitation was mentioned by Pedro Beltrao, Jim Hardy, Duncan Hull and Deepak Singh. Some other answers:

- The Editor-in-Chief of Nature once told David Attenborough that he should read my blog. (Ed Yong)
- Getting a job with PLoS in the comments of one of my posts. (Bora Zivkovic)
- Co-founded a network of science bloggers (The DNA Network) and been invited (and accepted!) to work at MIT. (Ricardo Vidal)
- Getting interviewed by Jon Udell. (Deepak Singh)
- I loaned a power cable to a Nature editor. (Bob O'Hara)

7. Did you write a blog post or comment you later regretted?

For most people that was not a big issue. Ed Yong regrets to have written nice things about studies that later turned out to be rubbish not so good.

8. When did you first learn about science blogging?

Many different answers. Nodalpoint was mentioned by several bloggers, including Duncan Hull, Paolo Nuin and Pedro Beltrao. T. Ryan Gregory was introduced to science blogging by his graduate student. The most hilarious answer is from Henry Gee and involves a garage, an old washing-machine motor and heavier-than-air flight.

9. What do your colleagues at work say about your blogging?

The standard answer seems to be that most of them don't know or don't care. I would hope that in the future we will have more answers like the one from Bora Zivkovic: That's what they are paying me for and I hope they are happy.

10. How the heck do you have time to blog and do research at the same time?

Most people blog in their spare time. I hope to see more daytime bloggers that blog as part of their science job in 5 years (this relates to questions #5, #8 and #9).

11. Extra credit: are you able to write an entry to your blog that takes the form of a poem about your research?

Not all bloggers answered that question, but you can find poetry by Heather Etchevers (who suggested that question), Stephen Curry (who inspired it), Henry Gee, Eva Amsen, Bora Zivkovic, Maxine Clarke (a play), Massimo Pinto (science fiction), Shirley Wu (karaoke), Mike Fowler, Erika Cule, Kristi Vogel, Bob O'Hara (art), Viktor Po (a dance) and myself. Paolo Nuin needs a few more encouraging comments before he will write a poem.

Update: Andrew Perry has created two great wordle images for question #1 and question #2.