

Bench philosophy (23): Scientific blogs

# Blogging in the Life Sciences

Life science blogs have sprung up like mushrooms in recent years and the list of researchers running their own blog is getting longer and longer. Steven Buckingham has checked, which blogs are worth reading.

The most important room in the whole of the Sussex University campus is the tea room in the library basement. I don't know if it is still there but in my day it was by far the best place to meet and talk to, people studying things different from you: physicists, mathematicians, philosophers and social scientists. Sadly, our world contracted when we became professional scientists. But look up, things are changing. A wormhole has been found that links back to that space. It is called the blogosphere.

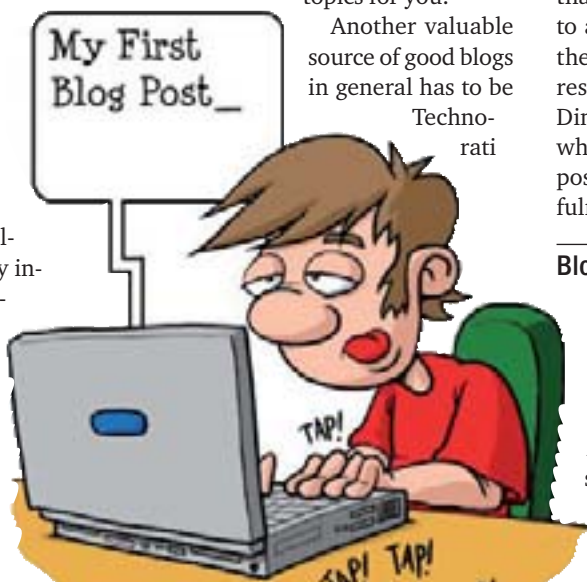
No-one knows for sure exactly how many blogs (short for weblogs) there are but one thing is sure, they are on the increase and they are emerging as a serious tool for the lab. To be sure, the vast majority of blogs are of very little value except to the authors (particularly avoid those with the words "random thoughts" in the title). But hidden in the dross there is some very valuable silver. Indeed, the very best blogs are little short of sophisticated online magazines. They are very well-written, carefully researched, intensely interesting and a thorough good read. Unlike traditional science media, blogging is personal, fast, and idiosyncratic. They are places where off-the-wall thoughts can find their first tentative expression, then get picked up by others, kicked around and eventually formed into real ideas – what Arianna Huffington, author of top-rated blog Huffington Post, called "the wisdom of the crowd".

## How to find high quality blogs

The trouble is, the crowd is only wise on its good days. How to find the blogs worth reading and not get stuck in the internet's time-wasting web? For those of us who were brought up in the days of libraries and the Dewey classification system, the problem is that the blog world, indeed the whole web 2.0 world, is so anarchic. Where do I start? Where are the places I know will be of good quality, places I can trust? Where are the blog equivalents of *Nature* and *Lab Times*?

The first places to go in our quest for blog gold are the quality websites that aggregate blogs for you. Go to the *Nature* blog site (<http://blogs.nature.com/>) first of all. A few years ago, the Nature Publishing Group decided that serious professional blogging would play an important part in science communication. They saw how it would further their mission statement to "ensure that the results of science are rapidly disseminated to the public throughout the world, in a fashion that conveys their significance for knowledge, culture and daily life". *Nature blogs* organises blogs by topic (such as Neuroscience, Bioinformatics, Life Science) and picks out the hottest topics for you.

Another valuable source of good blogs in general has to be Technorati



(<http://technorati.com/>). Technorati is to blogs what Google is to web pages. It indexes millions of blogs "in real time" as they say on their site (I am never quite sure what unreal time is). Their home page is self-explanatory and easy to follow, inviting you to search for blogs by title or by content, either using a keyword search or by navigating through their blog directory.

A distinctive feature of Technorati is their ranking of blogs by "authority": an index of how influential the blog is, as determined by an algorithm that measures the

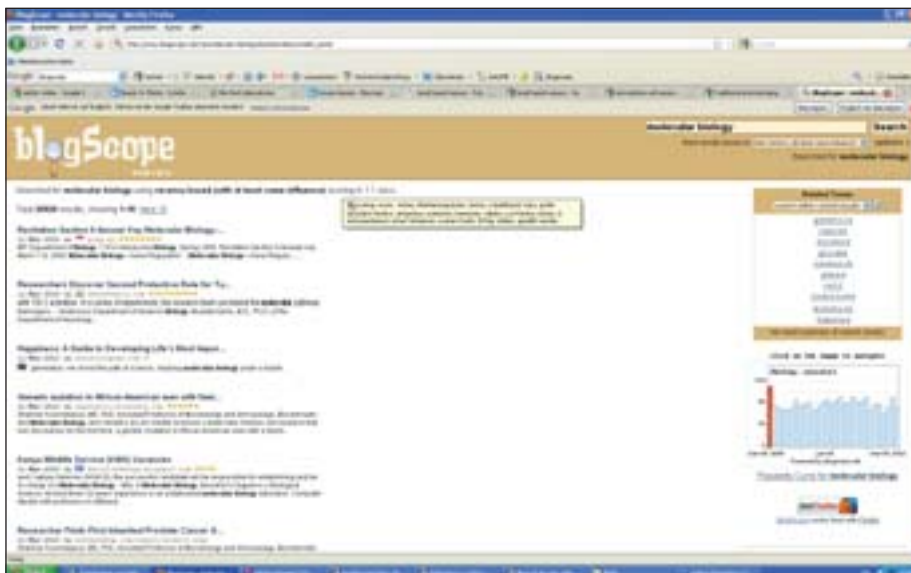
site's "linking behaviour, categorization and other data" (<http://technorati.com/what-is-technorati-authority/>). How it does that is not clearly spelled out and the value of the scoring has been questioned (see the discussion page on the Wikipedia entry on Technorati) but, all the same, it is a valuable pointer to blogs that are at least worth a closer look.

Another useful feature of Technorati is the "recent influential reactions" section. Type in a keyword of interest (I tried Dimebon, a drug that had been showing promise as a new Alzheimer's therapy) and run the search. Then pick one of the results and a click on the green link (not the blue one that takes you to the source) will take you to a page with the influential reactions at the bottom. Incidentally, it was here while researching this article that I found that Dimebon had failed a clinical trial, news which broke just two days before I composed this feature – a testimony to the usefulness of following blogs.

## Blog search engines

A radically new way of finding blogs is being developed at the University of Toronto. BlogScope (<http://www.blogscope.net/>) describes itself as a search, analysis and visualization tool. As you would expect from any blog search engine, a keyword search term delivers a set of blogs with the option of a quick preview without leaving the site. But what makes BlogScope different? The first thing is the ability to sort the results with varying blends of recency, relevancy and influence, so you can nuance your search to your own needs. The second feature is that the site returns a set of related keywords that help you refine your search. Just below the related keywords, you will find one of their "Popularity curves" – a histogram representing the number of times your search terms have come up in the blogosphere in the past two to three months, giving a snapshot of what is hot and what is getting hotter.

Blog awards are another fruitful source of blogs worth reading. The Weblog Awards



**BlogScope** is a good starting point to search the web for interesting life science blogs.

(<http://weblogawards.org/>) are held every year and readers are invited to nominate, and finally vote for, blogs in various categories. With nearly 900,000 votes cast for the finalists of the 2008 awards, this is surely a good place to find quality blogs. Sadly, voting for the 2009 awards had to be cancelled because of limitations in computing resources, so the future of this valuable resource is in question.

Once you have got your collection of blogs started, it will pretty much take care of itself. Follow the links to or from other blogs – many blogs include a blogroll of related and recommended sites. Look for blogs by scientists you admire – one of my favourites is David Colquhoun's "Improbable Science" blog at <http://www.dcsience.net/>. David is an outspoken critic of pseudoscience and is not afraid of engaging his opponents in rational debate.

### Collecting blogs

If you use an aggregator, it will probably also make recommendations based on your blog reading habits. Google Reader recommends new blog sites but also recommends individual postings, which can often lead you to interesting places. Building up a collection of blogs to follow is like culturing sourdough: you will keep adding some new stuff and taking some away all the time as your interests change.

So let me give you a taste of my sourdough. What sites would I recommend? Of course, that is very much a reflection of who I am and what I happen to be interested in. But we all need to keep up with the news and a good place for general gossip is

the Biology News Net site (<http://www.biologynews.net/>). Even if you don't have time to read the articles, just scanning through the headings gives a feel for what is happening beyond our own narrow areas of research.

There is always something worth printing off in the "Mystery Rays from Outer Space" blog (<http://www.iayork.com/MysteryRays/>). Don't let its title put you off. Mystery Rays is a fascinating collection of well-written and well-informed articles on anything from apoptosis (see the May 4th article) to myxamatoxis. This is a prime example of quality blogging, making you wonder how people find the time to write such things.

Steve Novella's "NeuroLogica" blog (<http://www.theness.com/neurologicablog/>) is another source of ideas and debate covering a wide variety of broadly neurobiological topics. As is the case for David Colquhoun's site, the discussions and comments on NeuroLogica are as good a read as the articles themselves. Try the recent discussion on acupuncture (<http://www.theness.com/neurologicablog/?p=1687#more-1687>) to get a taste.

Some blogs are a companion to a good, old-fashioned book and therefore have every motivation to be of respectable quality. The interestingness (to borrow the Flickr phrase) of Mindhacks (<http://www.mindhacks.com/>) is certainly a good advertisement for the book. Why did the passengers of Titanic cooperate, while those on the Herald of Free Enterprise didn't? Is there an upside to depression? Do nasty videos really make you violent? These are the sort

of intriguing must-read topics you will find on this blog. It has even made me a bit wary of fMRI – go to the blog to see why.

If you have seen the quality of the writing in Carl Zimmer's blog, "Loom" (<http://scienceblogs.com/loom/>), you won't be surprised to hear that he has authored seven books and writes for the *New York Times*. Here is blogging at its near best. Carl's articles are beautifully written and thought-provoking – sometimes short enough for a quick glance over coffee, sometimes long enough for you to want to print them out and read later.

### Fast, idiosyncratic and two-way

When you are ready for a little light relief, there are plenty of more humorous blogs to lighten your day. If you think the words "funny" and "medline" don't go together, NCBI ROFL (<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/discoblog/category/ncbi-rofl/>) may give you pause. It somehow manages to find oddities in serious science literature that will make you cringe or laugh – always a good source of science toilet humour to pin to the office door. Then there is that old favourite, Improbable Research ("science that makes you LAUGH and then

## List of interesting science blogs

Blog title	Tagline or comment	URL
<b>Science Blogs</b>	"60+ bloggers selected on the basis of their originality, insight, talent, and dedication"	<a href="http://scienceblogs.com/">http://scienceblogs.com/</a>
<b>Technorati</b>	First stop for life science blogs	<a href="http://technorati.com/blogs/directory/science/">http://technorati.com/blogs/directory/science/</a>
<b>Blog Scope</b>	Innovative blog search engine being developed at the University of Toronto	<a href="http://www.blogscope.net/">http://www.blogscope.net/</a>
<b>Nature Blogs</b>	Compendium compiled by Nature journal	<a href="http://blogs.nature.com/">http://blogs.nature.com/</a>
<b>Bad Science</b>	Criticisms of anti-science and bad science	<a href="http://www.badsience.net/">http://www.badsience.net/</a>
<b>Guardian Science Blog</b>	Science blog for UK newspaper "The Guardian"	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog">http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog</a>
<b>Oxford University Science blog</b>	"Read the latest science news and views from Oxford University"	<a href="http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/science_blog/">http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/science_blog/</a>
<b>Behavioural Science Blog</b>	"High-quality and comprehensive articles written for those who want to follow the latest research, but find traditional sources inaccessible"	<a href="http://behaviouralscience.net/">http://behaviouralscience.net/</a>
<b>Life Science Blogs</b>	"Life Science in Bite Sizes. All you need to know about Molecular Biology, Biochemistry, Genomics and Proteomics"	<a href="http://lifescienceblogs.com/">http://lifescienceblogs.com/</a>
<b>Cosmic Variance</b>	General science and science-related articles	<a href="http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/">http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/</a>
<b>Daniel Lamire's blog</b>	An honest picture of life in the lab	<a href="http://www.daniel-lemire.com/blog/">http://www.daniel-lemire.com/blog/</a>
<b>Mind Hacks</b>	"Neuroscience and psychology tricks to find out what's going on inside your brain"; companion site to a book of the same name	<a href="http://www.mindhacks.com/">http://www.mindhacks.com/</a>
<b>Mystery Rays from Outer Space</b>	"Meddling with things mankind is not meant to understand. Also, pictures of my kids"	<a href="http://www.iayork.com/MysteryRays/">http://www.iayork.com/MysteryRays/</a>
<b>Neurophilosophy</b>	Neuroscience, psychology and Philosophy	<a href="http://scienceblogs.com/neurophilosophy/">http://scienceblogs.com/neurophilosophy/</a>
<b>Brain Windows</b>	"New tools for peering into the brain"	<a href="http://brainwindows.wordpress.com/">http://brainwindows.wordpress.com/</a>
<b>Biosingularity</b>	Major advances towards "a time when we will be able to engineer new biological systems and have complete molecular control in manipulating existing life forms"	<a href="http://biosingularity.wordpress.com/">http://biosingularity.wordpress.com/</a>
<b>Thoughtomics</b>	"Evolution, bioinformatics, music and assorted random thoughts"	<a href="http://www.lucasbrouwers.nl/blog/">http://www.lucasbrouwers.nl/blog/</a>
<b>NCBI ROFL</b>	Pubmed can be fun	<a href="http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/discoblog/category/ncbi-rofl/">http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/discoblog/category/ncbi-rofl/</a>
<b>The Loom</b>	Blog by author of "The Tangled Bank: an introduction to evolution"	<a href="http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/loom/">http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/loom/</a>
<b>Gene Expression</b>	Genomics and society	<a href="http://scienceblogs.com/gnpx/">http://scienceblogs.com/gnpx/</a>
<b>David Colquhoun's blog</b>	Blog of one of the UK's leading neuroscientists – great site for controversy	<a href="http://www.dcscience.net/">http://www.dcscience.net/</a>
<b>NeuroLogica</b>	Another source of science and science-related controversy	<a href="http://www.theness.com/neurologicablog/">http://www.theness.com/neurologicablog/</a>

THINK": <http://improbable.com/>), hosts of the renowned igNobel prize.

The rise of blogging illustrates a general trend in the social history of technology: new technologies rarely supplant old ones, rather they usually complement them. Obviously, blogging will never replace seminars, conferences or publications. It is different from either of these. It is faster, so you'll get the news even quicker than we used to get it from conferences. It is idiosyncratic, so you get ideas from a shamelessly personal perspective. It is two-way, so you get to argue.

The open and informal nature of blogging may have cast a sheen of disrepute at first but as more serious blogs emerged, it became clear how this very feature has turned out to be one of its strengths. You get to hear ideas before they have had a chance to be knocked into shape, ideas that no journal editor would dare let out into the wild. You eavesdrop on the conversation between people of all disciplines with varying levels of expertise. But perhaps the most exciting, or even disconcerting, aspect of science blogging is its potential to open up the lab to the "common man". Some researchers provide a daily diary of their life in the lab, revealing how the business of science is really done. Others give air to their thoughts and reflections on lab life. Daniel Lemire at the University of Quebec in Montreal, blogs about all aspects of research life that entertains insiders and enlightens outsiders (<http://www.daniel-lemire.com/blog/>).

Take for instance his recent comments on whether sharing your data (he calls it open-sourcing, a suitable metaphor for blogging) is a good idea, or his discussion on how to deal with the pressure to publish too early.

But what I appreciate most about the blogosphere is getting back to the library tea room, even if it is only virtually. I have to be honest; the blogs I spend most time reading are the ones outside my field. So reader beware, the problem is not with finding good stuff, it is finding time to read it all and have some time spare to do your own science. In the meantime, I am off to the blogosphere for a few minutes...or hours.

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Fancy composing an installment of "Bench Philosophy"?

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