

Science Blogging: Some Particulars of the Contemporary Brazilian Scenario

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Abstract

This work addresses the particulars of scientific blogging in the Brazilian scientific context. It draws on an overall analysis of 105 Brazilian scientific blogs, using a variety of criteria such as the blogger's credentials and the blog institutional bond, frequency and length of postings, editorial guidelines, explicit target public, as well as the use of some web design tools. Such an analysis allows us to raise questions around the impact of the blog institutional bond over the frequency and volume of posts, e.g. why press vehicles scientific blogs face quantity problems in publishing and frequency, which are very similar to those faced by any fulltime university professor. As literature points out to the generalized problem of constant feeding of content that is prone to be found (at least in principle) in blogs and other more decentralized forms of publishing, we argue for what seems to be a more promising framework that goes beyond the focus on the interactive

possibilities of blogs and opens up space to question daily professional routines and specific scientific publication culture in Brazil compared to other countries.

Introduction

In 2013, during the 8th World Conference of Science Journalists, experts reported a generalized increase in scientific blogging over the last decade (ALMEIDA, 2013). They argued that blogs became a popular medium for sharing reflections over a number of scientific subjects that are not appropriately covered in mainstream media. Moreover, inasmuch as many researchers have turned to blogs as a locus for dissemination of scientific information and of their own work, online press vehicles and scientific reviews are starting out their own campaign to co-opt new science bloggers to their own staff¹.

Yet, science blogging is still a challenge for many researchers despite their access to university facilities and to up-to-date research data. Although it is clear that writing for blogs is not the same as writing a peer-reviewed paper, there is a lot of uncertainty about the appropriate tone to be used in the blog text and the amount of time a scholar is willing to spend on writing for this specific purpose.

This study is thus an attempt to outline some main patterns in current science blogging in Brazil. We have analyzed 105 Brazilian scientific blogs, using 19 criteria. For the sake of this article, we have focused our analysis mainly on institutional bond of blogs, in connection with particular temporal dynamics of posts in each blog. Although science blogging seems to be promising in Brazil, we have come to the conclusion that blogs of Brazilian press vehicles are the least prolific in dissemination of scientific information. We also observed that independent blogging prevails over other institutional blogs both in terms of frequency and volume of postings, despite the occurrence of important variations between different fields of knowledge.

¹ As an indicator of the increasing editorial interest in science blogging, the senior science editor at Wired review Betsy Mason points out that 50% of 113 blog propositions they had received during their 2013 campaign was fostered by scientists, while only 25% were undertaken by journalists. She argued that 42% of candidates had never had a blog before (ALMEIDA, 2013, p. 2).

Methodology

Our universe consists of 105 blogs selected according to the following steps. Firstly, we accessed all of the 41 science blogs that were available by March 2013 at ScienceBlogs Brazil (<http://scienceblogs.com.br/>). Secondly, we made up a list of 48 independent blogs whose links were cited within blogs at ScienceBlogs Brazil. Thirdly, we assessed 16 science blogs available at the most expressive online national press vehicles: Folha de S. Paulo, O Globo online, Estado de São Paulo. Only one national magazine – the Superinteressante magazine – was included in the sample.²

The analysis of 105 Brazilian scientific blogs was carried out in two phases, and were done separately³. In the first phase, which lasted from March 18th to April 31st 2013, we carried out an overall analysis using 19 criteria⁴. In the second phase, from February 24th to April 2nd 2014, we assessed the daily frequency of posts on each of the 105 science blogs. Then, all 105 blogs were distributed according to their main dominant theme, so that we could compare posting frequencies in blogs within the same field of knowledge. Finally, the blogs were classified according to their institutional bonds (blog network, independent or press vehicles blogs). The analysis of post frequency and volume took into account the posts published from Jan 31st 2012 to April 30th 2013.

Data were organized using the Microsoft Excel package as follows. We began by showing the distribution of our 105 blogs according to their institutional bond (figure 1). Then, we classified our sample of blogs according to their dominant theme (figure 2).

² As a core methodological choice, our data collection was designed in a way that it favors the reconstitution of a network of blogs. Such choice is in line with the importance that Salahbrahim, Le Grand and Latapy (2010, p. 1) have given to the study of blogs as complex social networks: “a blog network, made of blogs interconnected by citation links, is a very interesting object for the study of complex systems dynamics as it is easy to extract and provides precise temporal information.” Moreover, the fact that ScienceBlogs USA is a very popular and well-established virtual community of science blogs — according to Wikipedia, it had already reached over 1.1 million of monthly unique visitors way back in 2008 — allows us to inquire about the supposed advantages of blogging in a similar network in Brazil. For blog citation practices in other languages, also see Julien (2014).

³ This temporal gap between the first and the second phase of the research was due to the need we felt later to deepen the blog analysis, so that we could grasp patterns in posting frequency in different institutional settings more rigorously.

⁴ We have applied 105 blogs according to the following features, grouped into four main sections: 1) Interface: title, domain, person or staff hold responsible for blog posting, institutional bond of the blogger, institutional bond of the blog; 2) Blog orientation: homepage navigation structure, main blog links, blog editorial guidelines, explicit public target, institutional support; 3) Web design concept: background display, background text, banner/title, links; 4) Posting: post length, qualitative evaluation of post frequency (regular/irregular), quantitative evaluation of post frequency, tagging, blog host (independent blog, blog inside a website).

And finally, we gave an overview of the dynamics of posting by intersecting the blog institutional bond with the dominant theme, so that we could compare the dynamics of blogs within a same field of knowledge but in different institutional contexts (figure 3).

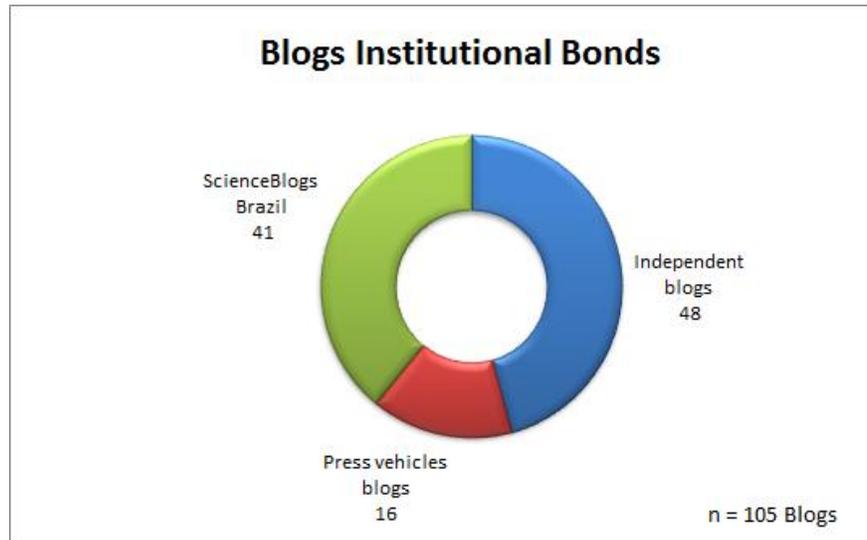


Figure 1

Blog institutional Bond	Dominant theme	N. of blogs
ScienceBlogs Brazil	Science (miscellaneous)	9
	Biology	9
	Environment/Ecology	6
	Behavioral psychology	4
	Physics	3
	Chemistry	3
	Astronomy	2
	Paleontology/Archeology	3
	Humor	1
	Medical sciences	1
	Total number of blogs in this category	41
Press vehicle blogs	Science (miscellaneous)	11
	Environment/Ecology	4
	Biology*	1
		Total number of blogs in this category
Independent blogs	Behavioral psychology	16
	Biology*	9
	Environment/Ecology	8
	Science (miscellaneous)	8
	Neurosciences	2
	Physics	2
	Astronomy	1
	Chemistry	1
	Medical sciences	1
	Total number of blogs in this category	48

*For the sake of simplification, Biology includes Zoology, Microbiology, Biotechnology, Genetics and Evolutionary Theory

Figure 2

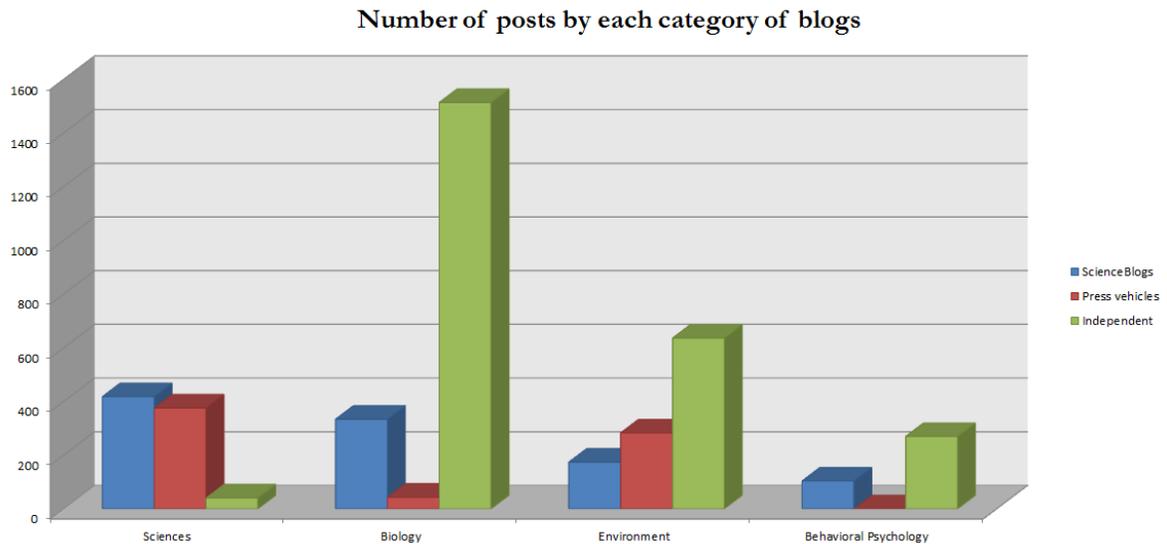


Figure 3

Results

Figure 1 displays the distribution of the 105 blogs over three possible institutional bonds. The most expressive group is that of the independent blogs, with 48 cases (45.71% of the sample), followed by the 41 blogs hosted at ScienceBlogs Brazil (39.04%). The 16 press vehicles science blogs accounted for only 15.23% of the sample.

Although we have assessed every science blog within ScienceBlogs Brazil, we have come to a list of an even wider network of independent blogs not hosted at that same community of blogs. Interestingly, blogs at ScienceBlogs cite independent blogs and also press vehicles blogs.

In a second analytical step, we have organized the 105 blogs according to their dominant theme. This allowed us to infer their dominant field of knowledge and expertise. While the number of blogs within each type of institutional bond is variable, the most dominant themes/fields of knowledge remain the same: Sciences (miscellaneous), Biology (including all subareas), Behavioral Psychology and Environment (Figure 2).

The frequency of posts in each category of institutional bond is worth of some brief notes. Generally speaking, blogs from ScienceBlogs Brazil face serious problems of constant feeding of content. Many were discontinued over the period of analysis. Others such as “Biologia na Rede” (Biology) and “Vivo Verde” (Environment) are very active,

but even when they post twice or three times a day, they still face problems of keeping the same regularity throughout the days. Conversely, press vehicle blogs are the most regular, but not necessarily the most frequent (some only post twice or three times a week while some independent blogs post almost on a daily basis). And last, we have the independent blogs category, which are the most prominent in volume and frequency of postings.

Figure 3 confirms this result by providing us with an outline of the total number of posts in each type of institutional bond, according to the four most frequent themes/fields of knowledge in each category of institutional bond.

As we can see in the figure 3, independent blogs post expressively more in almost every theme/field knowledge, except in Sciences (miscellaneous). In this case, blogs of ScienceBlogs Brazil are the most prominent. In other words, when it comes to one single field of knowledge, Independent blogs surpass the other two categories in terms of volume of postings. However, regarding miscellaneous postings covering many themes or fields of expertise, then, Science blogs in ScienceBlogs Brazil are the most prominent.

Discussion and Conclusion

Brazilian journalist Carla Almeida (2013, p. 2) provides us with a sharp diagnosis of contemporary science blogging by citing science writer Ed Yong's conference last year: "It is not that the prejudice against blogs have entirely disappeared, but for those that have been following science blogosphere, especially in English language, it is undeniable that they are increasing in prestige." But is that true for Brazilian context?

Yes, there is still a lot of prejudice against blogging as a trustworthy mode of science communication. But Brazilian faculty members of public institutions seem to be already there. They are the second most frequent category of bloggers when it comes to the analysis of the bloggers' credentials: they hold for 33.64% of the total bloggers in our sample, against press vehicle bloggers hold for only 14.74%. Curiously, the majority of our sample (37.78%) has chosen not to publicize their credentials. For some reason (lack of confidence? lack of attention? lack of orientation?), more than one third of the bloggers do not say publicly who they are and what field they are speaking from.

Whatever that means, it is clear to us that press vehicles lack editorial policy in regard to science blogs. Conversely to the English speaking blogosphere, press vehicles science blogs are not spreading over, possibly due to the cutting off of expenses in many press organizations in recent years. Brazilian universities, specially the public ones, do not do any better in the policy making rank. We are calling out for institutional blogging policy such as that of Harvard Law School⁵ and many other prestigious institutions in the English speaking countries.

Yet, new content is constantly being put forward by independent bloggers, especially when dealing with a specific field of expertise. There is no mystery in it: faculty members not only have access to original and unpublished data, but also they are the keen producers of new knowledge. So, why not blogging?

There are strong evidences that scholars are now looking for more articles online than they ever did, with “databases, blogs and other information sources becoming increasingly important” (Van Noorden, 2014, p. 3). But this should not be the main argument for scholar science blogging. Writing for a blog is not the same as writing a peer-reviewed paper. Blog writing relies on both constancy and frequency of posts and, therefore, requires planning and a possible division of work, especially in those blogs that cover a range of different fields of knowledge. In this specific matter, blogs at ScienceBlogs seem to be doing better. Moreover, the lack of commercial interest in maintaining science blogs in press vehicles is not but a strong evidence that universities must take a part on the scene. Otherwise, independent blogging will prevail for a long time, open to the uncertainties of the fate.

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⁵ See the terms of use for law weblogs at Harvard University website (2014).

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