

Are science blogs facing extinction? A panel report

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Introduction

Since Web 2.0 tools first paved the way for the blogging boom about ten years ago, science blogs were believed to offer new possibilities for writing about scientific issues for a lay audience. Seen either as an open, democratic forum or a new mode of scientific writing and reading—one that is essentially more fluid, conversational, trustworthy, and editorially independent in character—science blogs raised many expectations since their emergence.

Yet, many scholars argue that some of these expectations were rarely, if ever, met. And even if most scholarly reviews do account for a diversity of blogging initiatives for scientific purposes, a number of them have come to the conclusion that these interactive, autonomous, and affordable platforms have been left behind in what can only be referred to as “the golden days” of science blogging.

This panel aimed at questioning the survival of blogs by addressing the following questions: are science blogs facing extinction? If not, what sort of blogs have survived? What are the main challenges and conditions for their survival? Can periodicity and quality be combined under a trustworthy scientific label? What types of science blogs are more likely to attract non-scientific readers? Do blogs fully realize their interactive potential? If so, under what conditions?

In this panel, participants were invited to share their local/global science blog experiences by bringing forth specific case studies and broader theoretical and critical reviews. We have organized the case studies in terms of a continuum of each blog’s level of interactivity, ranging from the least interactive example to the most interactive one.

1. *“Dialogues with science: What makes a blog last?”* by Juliana Santos Botelho and Adlane Vilas-Boas

The authors begin with a disturbing statement: when it comes to Brazilian science blogs, it is much easier to start a blog than to keep it active. By analyzing a sample of 106 Brazilian science blogs, the authors have come to the conclusion that 50% of them have not been updated for at least two years. However, the fact that many blogs have not been updated does not mean that these blogs are no longer accessed and read. To fully demonstrate this argument, Botelho and Vilas-Boas have chosen the science blog [Diálogos c/ Ciência](#), a blog-laboratory of science communication that they have been moderating since 2013. The total number of visualizations on this blog almost doubled from 2014 to 2015 despite the fact that the frequency of postings had dramatically reduced in the same period. It is worth noting, though, that the increase in the number of visualizations is largely due to a single post entitled, “A reprodução sexuada nos fungos” (*The sexual reproduction of fungi*). Published in December 2014, the post is currently responsible for 38% of the total number of visualizations, and this number continues to increase day after day. Although very popular, it lacks a lot of important information as a text aimed at popularizing science, such as bibliographical references, visual explanatory information, and cue definitions stemming from the genetics field.

This sudden popularity of this particular post has led to important changes in at least two different settings: the moderators’ editorial guidelines and the post author’s attitude toward his own text. Furthermore, the post has taught the moderators a lesson about the unpredictable effects of Internet text posting. They acknowledge that science blogs enact many possible roles, such as platforms for the popularization of science, pedagogical tools, debate boosters, or general repertoires of scientific information. Yet, given the increasing rate of inactivity in their Brazilian science blog sample, it is possible that many of these blogs are more likely to become **scientific information repertoires**. What this means is that their content may still be accessed and read even if the blogs are no longer updated.

This fact leads them to conclude that the demands for scientific information prevail over the short-term lives of science blogs. The reasons behind this may be various: (1) keeping a blog active is a time-consuming task, especially when it comes to the production of original content; (2) blog texts differ from peer-reviewed texts in terms of their target audience, style, and periodicity; (3) competitiveness in the scientific realm may be pushing researchers to prioritize peer-reviewed publications; and, finally, (4) in a context of scarce financial and human resources, such as in the current Brazilian situation, many science blogs simply must perish.

2. *“A political and scientific issue: Discourses about racial diversity in science blogs”* by Alicianne Gonçalves

Alicianne Gonçalves places her bets on the survival of science blogs insofar as they contribute to the debate on controversial racial issues in the Brazilian setting. By means of a discourse analysis on posts from two Brazilian science blogs—[Haeckeliano](#) (*Haeckelian*) and [Darwin e Deus](#) (*Darwin and God*)—Gonçalves has demonstrated how these blogs distinctly frame racial issues in a scientific manner. They can either shed light on daily experiences of discrimination by using a contemporary scientific framework or help explain scientific theories that tackle issues of discrimination. Moreover, internal differences in terms of the individual blogger’s occupation and media outlet become a venue to express different perspectives and arguments. These are two different ways of both approaching the Brazilian racial debate and relating it to the scientific theories that are at stake.

Seen from this point of view, science blogs are still very much alive and are important for considering and reinterpreting issues that are not commonly associated with standard “scientific knowledge.” Therefore, science blogs may become actual sites of knowledge formation and contestation for controversial everyday issues, more specifically by providing a space for discussing and reinterpreting Brazilian racial reality.

3. “*Climate change on the internet soapbox: Preaching to the converted*” by Jennifer Metcalfe

Jennifer Metcalfe has tackled the dynamics of science blogs and how they relate to their audiences. She looks at two blogs focused on climate extremes—Joanne Nova’s [JoNova](#) and John Cook’s [Skeptical Science](#)—and examines who is engaging with these blogs, and how they are doing so. She uses the method of Leximancer thematic content analysis to study the readers’ comments and to understand the modes of participation and the nature of interaction between the main blogger and other bloggers, as well as with ordinary persons.

Her analysis points to a community of commentators which is highly homogeneous in character (mainly male or pseudonym-protected), and mostly identified with the line of arguments presented by the blogger. In Metcalfe’s terms, climate change bloggers “preach to the converted”; that is, they establish a politically engaged community of dialogue that is likely to downplay concurrent positions and to reinforce the bloggers’ standpoints. Despite the scientists/science communicators’ willingness to explain the context of science and to go beyond traditional media, blogs are mostly used to promote tips for action rather than debating the science itself, thus establishing an important link with activist and other high profile groups that are intent on expanding their numbers of followers and developing community networks for “digital story telling.”

Based on these findings, Metcalfe questions whether blogs are actually fulfilling their potential by engaging common citizens in scientific debates, as science blogs promised to do in their old days.

4. “*Science communication and teh internets: Tricksters, trolls and rhizomes*” by Hauke Riesch and Jonathan Mendel

Hauke Riesch and Jonathan Mendel explore the non-controlled, anarchic, playful, and grassroots interplay between science blogging culture and science/social policy, in contrast with the “boring, dull and patronizing” tone adopted by official online communication spaces. To do so, they address the positive contribution of the so-called “badscience” blogs. They call “badscience” a collective of scientists, science activists, and laypeople with no formal gatekeeping mechanisms in their community. Their activism relies on writing and campaigning against people who make dubious scientific claims (hence *badscience*), generally within the field of medicine. These bloggers, who usually dispense with credentials to present themselves anonymously, do not engage in self-censorship in public discussions, as terms such as “quacks,” “frauds,” and “shysters” are often used to address those who peddle “pseudo-science.”

To illustrate the positive aspects of badscience blogging, Riesch and Mendel introduce as a case study the controversy about chiropractic treatment fostered by the British science writer Simon Singh in 2008. Singh wrote a column in *The Guardian* criticizing the lack of scientific evidence in support of chiropractic treatments, and got sued for libel by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA). He appealed before the British Court, but the case was allowed to proceed. The Court’s decision caused dismay among badscience bloggers, who were used to getting libel threats regularly. A plan for direct action was then established by the badscience community, which included three levels of response: (1) the reposting of the offending article to make it easily

findable; (2) the mobilization of a network of medical and more general scientists intent on debunking within 24 hours the scientific studies cited by the BCA in their favor; (3) making legal complaints against the BCA at the British Chiropractic Council (BCC) because certain medical claims could not be substantiated with published scientific evidence and therefore a legal breach was found on the regulatory code of practice. As a consequence of the increased number of legal complaints (and all of the expenses involved in making them), the BCA dropped the action in 2010.

In brief, the badscience community was able to draw on widespread scientific and legal expertise to formulate a response to certain claims. It was also able to draw on various levels of engagement that members could participate in. Finally, it could draw on media expertise and connections to publicize activities, such as when *The Guardian* gave maximum publicity to the polemics involved.

Riesch and Mendel's study approaches science blogging as a powerful social mobilization tool. Drawing back on the *Trickster archetype*, the authors emphasize the advantages of how badscience bloggers promise to be "all the fun of the fair," rather than focusing on rational discussion and "civility." Not only do they believe in the critical potential and mobilization power of these blogs, but also in their capacity to reverse important social, economic, and political asymmetries among social actors.

5. Conclusion

To bring the current challenges of science blogging to the forefront, each study presented in this panel has referred back to a particular science blogging scenario. Regardless of the specificities of each contribution, there seems to be a general consensus about the survival potential of blogs, which is intimately related to the type of relationship that science blogs are prone to build with their particular audiences. In as much as they are still capable of forging different forms of readership, science blogs will likely remain an important source of information and public opinion formation for some time.

Note

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