



My year as a stem-cell blogger

Paul Knoepfler explains why he joined the ranks of the blogosphere, and why you should too.

The final week of October 2009 started badly for me, when *Nature* closed its stem-cell blog The Niche — one of my favourites as it covered my field. A few days later, events took a more serious turn for the worse when — out of the blue — I was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer. I was 42. Blogs and blogging were suddenly the last thing on my mind.

More than a year and a half later, I am in remission and doing great. The battle against the cancer was the most difficult of my life and I still worry that it may come back. But the experience also had positive effects. For one, I still missed The Niche, and assumed that others did too. Once I recovered, I found the courage to start a replacement. After all, how hard can blogging be when compared with facing cancer? A year on, it has been a remarkable experience.

Compared with just two years ago, blogging is much more accepted as a means of communication by scientists, many of whom read blogs even if they do not write them. Yet, in my experience, it remains relatively rare for faculty-level academic biological researchers to blog regularly, particularly in controversial fields such as stem-cell research. As far as I know, I am the only stem-cell faculty scientist in the world who runs a regularly updated blog. (If I am wrong then please get in touch to say hello!)

Why is this? Other scientists in academia tell me they worry that blogging would damage their careers. Specifically, they fear that colleagues would view them as amateurs, 'wasting time' on blogging, which could reduce their chances of achieving tenure. They fear the wrath of others in the field should they post the 'wrong' thing on their blog, and they worry about payback in negative grant and paper reviews. Some are concerned about attracting unruly and insulting readers' comments.

Are they right to be fearful? In an entire year of blogging I have had to censor just six inflammatory or defamatory comments. Despite my blog taking on the anti-stem-cell community in the United States and the misinformation its members peddle, such as the meme that adult stem cells are a panacea that make embryonic stem cells redundant, I have received remarkably few personal attacks from them. I am grateful for that, if puzzled.

This is certainly not because my blog goes unnoticed. True, I started with just five readers a day, but one year later, traffic has increased more than 30-fold and continues to rise. The blog averages 150 visitors a day and sometimes up to 500 a day, made up of a veritable *Who's Who* in stem-cell science, and beyond. How do I know? Senior figures in the field tell me in confidence that they read and enjoy the blog, although none has publicly

contributed to it — perhaps a sign that there is still a way to go before scientists stop being nervous about blogs.

My audience extends beyond academics, and discussion on the blog has catalysed links between academic scientists, biotechnology companies, big pharma, government officials, funding agencies, investors, teachers, reporters, students and patient advocates.

The blog has also helped to coordinate political efforts to advance stem-cell research through campaigns that put pressure on US and Californian officials to vote pro-science and pro-stem cells. I find self-publishing on my blog a liberating break from the tedious and frustrating grind of peer review, and it has encouraged me to write more for general audiences.

There has been some negative feedback, usually expressed privately rather than on the blog itself. Some critics cautioned that I might anger 'the wrong people' in academia or at funding agencies. Others were more direct with their disapproval of some of my most popular posts — usually those that mentioned specific funding agencies or companies by name — with the implied threat that I would see papers or grant applications rejected. Some who disliked my outspokenness insisted I shut down the blog. But don't let this put you off — the threats came from a very small number of people and have (so far) been toothless. My lab is fine in terms of funding and publishing, and I recently got tenure.

Here are some tips for beginners. Start slowly; wait a day after writing and reread your draft before posting. Try to avoid discussing your own institution, and critique papers or theories in the field in a constructive manner. It is important

that you include your own opinions, but do not use your blog to broadcast your opinions about issues that are unrelated to science.

Update your blog regularly, because readers will not visit blogs that they perceive as boring or 'old news'. Read and comment on other blogs, which will lead people to yours. Get a Twitter account to promote it and dabble with search-engine optimization. And do tell your colleagues about your blog.

Savvy scientists must increasingly engage with blogs and social media. A new generation of young researchers has grown up with an ever-present Internet. Publishers have been quicker than academics to react to this new world, but scientists must catch up. Even if you choose not to blog, you can certainly expect that your papers and ideas will increasingly be blogged about. So there it is — blog or be blogged. ■

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