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Scientific blogging as a model for professional networking online

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Abstract

Scientific blogging is a relatively new kind of activity that scientists and people related to science do online. In this essay I'm sharing my own experience about how scientific blogging could be used to establish and advance your professional networking online. The model I use proposes blogging analytical content in a precise scientific niche and sharing discussion and expert opinions through web tools. I use a blog as a central hub for analysis of information flowing from my personal filters and for setting up collaborative filters online, based on professional trusted content. Overall, I think a blog could be one of the best web tools for scientists to build a professional network online.

Keywords: science online, Web 2.0, blog, scientific blogging, networking

Introduction

Scientific blogging is a Web 2.0 tool[1] [1], which combines all blogs about different aspects of science, which are usually run by scientists or people familiar with science. As examples of this growing online community you can look at some platforms and aggregators: ScienceBlogs.com[2], ResearchBlogging.org[3], and Nature Network[4].

There are many reasons why scientists blog. To get a sense you can read "The science blog meme"[5], an online interview with 34 scientists on the subject "Why do we blog" [2]. The most common reasons mentioned are the following [3]: passion to share new exciting research (done by you or others) in your field and discussions with colleagues around the world, to talk about science in informal settings, to learn online tools for scientists, to improve writing skills, etc.

I have been blogging for 7 years and stayed tightly in my area of expertise (niche). When I started blogging in English (my

[1] http://www.cshblogs.org/cshprotocols/2008/04/03/web-20-for-biologists-are-any-of-the-current-tools-worth-using/
[2] http://scienceblogs.com/
[3] http://researchblogging.org/
[4] http://network.nature.com/blogs

[5] http://blogs.nature.com/mfenner/2008/11/30/why-do-we-blog-and-other-important-questions-answered-by-34-science-bloggers

first language is Russian), I set up a few goals:

- Practice tight and productive networking with scientists and medical professionals in the same niche of interest from around the world.
- Transform professional connections online into real connections and collaborations.
- Get a sense of what is science online, and what web tools I can use to increase my scientific productivity.
- Summarize all of my notes, bookmarks and thoughts in the area of my interest and put them in one place online (database), where I can easily find them at any time.
- Improve my language (English) and writing skills.
- Monetize and possibly earn some money from blogging.
- Acquire professional value, peer recognition and my "authority" for advancement in career.

It turns out that the networking part has worked especially wonderfully for me. I'll share my experience in this essay.

Information overload and its management

During my PhD work I started to look for literature online and useful tools that would allow me to manage information, and there was nothing at the time that was specifically suitable for scientists. Now we have a lot of scientific information available online, frequently called "information overload", but also enough tools to manage it. The problem is that not many scientists know about these tools and sometimes don't want to pick them up if they do know. I started intensively using RSS technology and reference managers, which allowed me to deal with this information overload.

I use a RSS Reader to set up my personal informational filters online. I subscribe by RSS to PubMed via the query "stem cell" (about 50 new articles daily), about 20 "stem cell blogs", about 10 scientific blogs, some scientific journals (which get indexed in PubMed slowly after publication release), and a few news services.

For managing web pages that I like, including articles, I use online bookmarking tools (reference managers [4,5]), such as: Connotea[6] and Mendeley[7]. These two and some others (Zotero[8], EndNote[9], Papers[10], etc.) were designed specifically for scientists. They allow you to create your personal searchable online library by keywords (tags) and find like-minded people who are using the same tags. So, your scientific library could be completely in the web (cloud) or in your pocket (though smartphone mobile applications) and you don't need to pack your computer.

At some point, I wanted to make notes from my tagged references online in order to summarize current knowledge and trends. I decided to blog, because the number of reasons that I mentioned above motivated me and I wanted to share information with other professionals in my field. I set up the first blog — Hematopoiesis.info[11], dedicated to professional networking in 2007.

[6] http://www.connotea.org/
[7] http://www.mendeley.com/
[8] http://www.zotero.org/
[9] http://www.myendnoteweb.com/
[10] http://mekentosj.com/papers/
[11] http://hematopoiesis.info/

Blogging analytical content

Because now there are a lot of tools available for information management, I decide to fill my blog with analytical content. I pick and summarize the most exciting and controversial work in my field — adult stem cell research. I'm writing about current trends in the field with a translational focus. My content is based not only on publications, but also on information from conferences that I attend and personal communication. It makes the content quite distinctive in my niche. Each of my posts contains links to a few papers, all connected by a particular topic. I put some of my thoughts into it and try to provoke reader discussion. I also try to incorporate some online tools in the blog that could be very useful for scientists.

I think with the variety of tools available right now, there is no need to have a blog just for quick sharing of some links or news or videos or fresh papers with your peers. We can do it on so-called microblogging platforms, such as Twitter[12] or on Google Buzz[13] or Facebook[14]. Another great online communication aggregator, FriendFeed[15] (FF), allows you to easily share links from any web-services that you use and become social by commenting. I was so excited by the possibilities of FriendFeed for science online that I wrote a post entitled "FriendFeed as a blogging killer"[16] [6].

Finally, I came up with the idea that nothing can replace a blog post if it's made in the format of a unique analytical thoughtful mini-article. You can even consider scientific blog posts as a small online publication judged by your peers from networking. I think blogging will be widely accepted in the scientific mainstream only if it can bring some professional value, i.e., unique trusted information with the possibility of real time discussion in informal settings.

The blog as a professional networking tool

So I'm using a blog as a hub for gathering information picked from my bookmarks, and its analysis. In this case, high quality analytical information is an input, but what is the output? I consider a blog as a part of an online project, which connects the shared information with professionals working in the same field. In order to get the output I share links to my blog posts in professional networking web-services, such as LinkedIn[17]. I'm networking in 20 LinkedIn professional groups, where I can submit discussion (as a forum) or share a link and switch to personal communication. Unexpectedly, I started to get more productive discussions about my blog posts on LinkedIn than on the blog itself. If people like my thoughts in the post, they contact me personally and make a connection. I was lucky enough to meet some people from my online connection on LinkedIn and Twitter in person through conferences. So professional networking online in your niche can be easily transformed to real connections.

Besides LinkedIn, I'm also submitting links to my posts to Twitter, sharing them in FriendFeed, Google Buzz, and

[12] http://hematopoiesis.info/
[13] http://buzz.google.com/
[14] http://www.facebook.com/
[15] http://friendfeed.com/
[16] http://hematopoiesis.info/2008/09/03/how-friendfeed-is-killing-blogging/
[17] http://www.linkedin.com/

Google Reader. I'm doing that because different people prefer different platforms for discussions online. I'm getting the maximum feedback only from all tools combined, where I share my blog posts. Recently, I've gotten more than 35 comments in LinkedIn and 10 comments on Google Buzz on one of my recent posts (Do we really need hematopoietic stem cell expansion for clinical use?[18]), but nothing on the blog itself. Sometimes, I have discussion only via emails, because some scientists do not trust blogs and hesitate to post information online for public exposure.

So, discussion about my blog posts can occur anywhere: comments under the post itself, comments in LinkedIn groups, replies on Twitter, comments on FriendFeed, and personal communication via email. I think that using a few tools together makes your networking online more productive and valuable.

From personal filter to collaborative filter

Scientists like to collaborate. I started to collaborate online simply by sharing drafts of my blog posts with my friends via Google Documents. I asked their opinions about the draft, and even for them to check my grammar. It was my first experience with sharing documents online. Later, I was trying to move from my personal information filters to collaborative filters.

Collaborative filters aim to sort the information stream from the popular (mass-media) and search engines (Google, PubMed) to professional user-trusted content with the possibility of discussion and collaboration [7]. The blog could be a good start for setting up a collaborative filter in your professional niche. You can use FF-like a tool to filter "trusted content" recommended to you by friends and experts, but not search engines[19] [8]. Today we can use a number of tools for collaborative filters with or without blogging.

I was always thinking about how to move the blog with my professional networking to collaboration. Via my connections online I simply sent a message and found a person who was interested in an online collaboration with me in setting up a new project — Stem Cell Assays. This project is dedicated to promoting rigorous reproducible results in stem cell research by sharing methods.

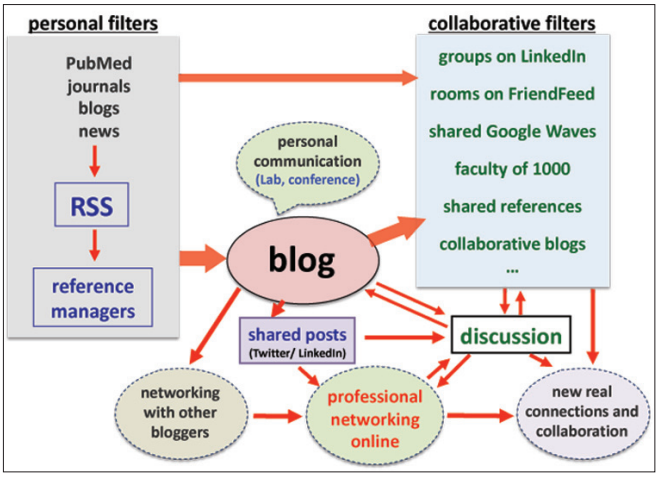

Figure 1. The model of scientific blogging as a platform for professional networking online

Another example of collaboration online is to make a community project. I created a Google Wave "Cell processing devices in cell therapy", made it public (everyone can read it) and embedded it into a Stem Cell Assays blog post. The link to this blog post went to LinkedIn groups and Twitter. The next day I got very good traffic from LinkedIn, but again people didn't comment on the blog post. Instead, I got some nice feedback in comments on LinkedIn and some people came directly to the Google Wave and started to update information in real time.

Concluding remarks and future perspectives

There is a lot of discussion going on on the Web about the future of scientific blogging[20] [9]. Will academic blogging advance your career[21] [10] or is it a waste of time? Scientific blogging is evolving [11]. I think blogs and scientific blogging in particular will survive and take a very precise niche among the variety of other web tools, only if it can provide trusted, valid, and useful content. Some analytical blog posts with ideas could be cited[22] [12] in scientific papers. Blogs will play more of a role in "article-level metrics"[23] [13] if the paper was mentioned by a blogger. Real time and updatable comments more likely will not be anonymous[24] [14] and more valuable for scientific community. This could be the biggest advantage compared to traditionally published papers.

Taking into account all of the good things about scientific blogging, I wouldn't say that everyone should do it. You should try to blog if you're curious and motivated enough to do it. Not every scientist is very social and curious about web tools. Not every scientist feels like sharing information online[25] [15] and being publically exposed[26] [16]. Importantly, scientific blogging is your continuous contribution in science after hours. So, you have to feel a strong commitment to a particular scientific field (your niche) and also realize that it's time consuming. You should be responsible for high quality valid content, which could be citable and trusted by your peers. Scientific bloggers also have to realize that unpublished information (that you have heard from yesterday's talk, for example) should be very carefully chosen, and that its release is not going to hurt your colleagues. Only in this case you can build your "scientific equity" or authority successfully.

I think that the proposed model (Figure 1) of scientific blogging as an online networking tool will work the best for junior investigators, e.g., PhD students, postdoctoral fellows and young PIs. In part, because these categories of people don't have enough scientific authority yet to be heard

[18] http://hematopoiesis.info/2010/07/07/do-we-really-need-hematopoietic-stem-cell-expansion-for-clinical-use/
[19] http://www.micropersuasion.com/2008/06/friendfeed-can.html
[20] http://cameronneylon.net/blog/the-nature-of-science-blog-networks/
[21] http://www.daniel-lemire.com/blog/archives/2008/04/04/the-negative-myths-about-academic-blogging/
[22] http://scienceblogs.com/clock/2009/06/why_or_why_not_cite_blog_posts.php
[23] http://www.plosone.org/static/almInfo.action
[24] http://synthesis.williamgunn.org/2009/05/24/online-engagement-of-scientists-with-the-literature-anonymity-vs-researcherid/
[25] http://hematopoiesis.info/2008/04/06/what-makes-scientists-not-comment-online/
[26] http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v466/n7302/full/466008a.html

by established academic professors, clinicians and business executives. When a young generation of scientists is coming to LinkedIn to discuss recent advances and controversies they have much less chance to be heard by established and respected scientists. In this case, building a meaningful foundation online, such a blog, could work nicely in order to network professionally at a high level.

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