

## » Websites and Blogs

“SCIENCE BLOGS ARE A VIRTUAL WATER COOLER FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS, POSTDOCTORAL ASSOCIATES, FACULTY, AND RESEARCHERS FROM A VARIETY OF DISCIPLINES AND AREAS OF INQUIRY”

(KOUPAR, 2010)

# The ISSUES Project

## WHY?

The role of websites and weblogs (blogs) in academia has continued to grow in significance over the last decade. Their attractiveness to academics, whether as individuals, small teams or large multi-institute consortia is largely rooted in their capacity to reach new audiences, beyond those that are likely to take an interest in academic journals. Crucially, they can provide a direct connection from academia to industry professionals, policy-makers and lay-people without conveyance through traditional media outlets or other third parties.

Additionally, blogs can serve as a “virtual water cooler” for academics and others interested in a topic, in that they offer a space for them to converge and converse. This offers an opportunity for community building within one’s own discipline and beyond. This community building can have benefits beyond disseminating research findings – through garnering feedback and interacting with others academics can refine ongoing work and develop new research ideas (Butler, 2005).

There is also a body of opinion that suggests that the application of new media to academia can be still more revolutionary. Blogs and websites can be seen as part of a reconceptualisation of the relationship between academics and lay-people. This argument posits that non-academics are no longer passive receivers of information; rather they have a participatory, interactive role. It thus represents, “a shift from public understanding to public engagement [and a] more open, egalitarian, and participatory science” (Kouper, 2010).

## HOW?

Academic blogs are a fairly heterogeneous group, so academics can take a number of different approaches to blogging. There are no set criteria for how a blog should be written, so they can be to varying degrees personal, political, philosophical, didactic, or ostensibly neutral and research-based. While there is some value in an individual or department dryly reporting the outcomes of their research, producing something that is opinionated and engaging is likely to be of interest to more people. There can also be benefits to academics in expanding the scope of their blog beyond their specific area of expertise by combining it with different subjects. ▶



► Publicising research through new media outlets can allow researchers more control in how their findings are “strategically framed”. The strategic framing concept emphasises the importance of the political and ideological contexts within which an argument is made, which then impact upon how that argument is perceived and understood (Nisbet and Scheufele, 2009). By using a blog to present research in the context of a wider argument and aim it at a particular demographic, researchers can potentially exert more control over how their research will be interpreted and employed, as opposed to adhering to the stricter editorial guidelines of peer-reviewed journals (Bubela et al., 2009). Researchers may find communicating research in this way can be effective means of both reaching *and* affecting a sizable audience.

It is crucial, though, that academics give thorough consideration to the implications of presenting work in an ideological context. The shift away from the rigour of peer-reviewed dissemination can cast doubt on or even undermine the neutrality and indifference that is crucial to good research. This can have personal repercussions in that it can affect the interpretation of a researcher’s integrity and consequently their worth as an academic. In a worst case scenario, liability to legal action is a possibility since blog writers are, in effect, their own publishers.

Using the internet to reach a wide readership may involve a trade off between the rigour of pure academic work and the short cuts necessary for making findings accessible to lay-people. By making something simpler and more digestible, one inevitably loses some of the depth of meaning and thoroughness that is demanded of high quality academic output. Academics bloggers must be wary of simplifying their outputs in such a way that the findings are corrupted or biased by dint of omissions.

It is crucial that blogging is seen as a knowledge exchange rather than a knowledge transfer activity. Rather than approaching new media as purely a one-way disseminatory platform, bloggers need to participate more widely. Key ways of doing this are posting messages on blogs and websites with similar subject matters, developing relationships with other bloggers, and interacting with posters on their own blog. Becoming a committed and diligent member of a community in this way is both a means of communicating one’s research and a learning opportunity in its own right. Similarly, it is important to have links to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, digg and so on, as well as prominently positioned buttons for RSS feeds. This encourages existing readers to effectively publicise the blog by sharing it throughout their network of contacts.

## REFERENCES

- BUBELA, T., NISBET, M., BORCHELT, R., BRUNGER, F., CRITCHLEY, C., EINSIEDEL, E., GELLER, G., GUPTA, A., HAMPEL, J. & HYDE-LAY, R. (2009) Science communication reconsidered. *Nature Biotechnology*, 27, 514-518.
- BUTLER, D. (2005) Science in the web age: Joint efforts. *Nature*, 438, 548-549.
- KOUPER, I. (2010) Science blogs and public engagement with science: practices, challenges, and opportunities. *JCOM*, 9, 1.
- NISBET, M. & SCHEUFELE, D. (2009) What’s next for science communication? Promising directions and lingering distractions. *American Journal of Botany*, 96, 1767.

## RESOURCES

The SUE Blog:  
[sustainableurbanenvironments.wordpress.com](http://sustainableurbanenvironments.wordpress.com)

Sites that might be of particular interest to researchers include Research Blogging, which is categorises and recommends blogs that deal with peer reviewed research, and PLoS ONE, which is an online open-access journal with an internal peer-reviewing service:  
[www.researchblogging.org](http://www.researchblogging.org)  
[www.plosone.org](http://www.plosone.org)

### » Stories from SUE

As part of its knowledge transfer activities, the activities of the SUE consortia were documented through a blog. This served two purposes. Firstly, it publicised the outputs and activities of the SUE programme. By bringing together news and information about the individual consortia and presenting this in an accessible style, it promoted interest across the various groups. Individuals who arrived at the blog with interest in a particular consortium could be directed through articles and links to the websites of other consortia working on research in the same areas.

Secondly, it served as an accessible space for researchers in the individual consortia to stay informed about the goings-on of fellow SUE researchers and consortia, and thus promoted inter-consortia cooperation and generated ideas for future research.