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Psychologists and ‘Blogademia’: Purpose, positives and pitfalls

by

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Psychologists and ‘Blogademia’: Purpose, positives and pitfalls

The BPS Public Engagement and Media Award in 2015 went to Mindhacks, a collective blog led by Vaughan Bell and Tom Stafford that has generated over 5000 posts over the past 10 years. Example posts include detailing descriptions of visual illusions, a self-test for synaesthesia, and tips on the best way to win an argument, among others. With a psychology blog being recognized for such an important award, it is clear to see why blogging for psychologists is becoming ever more popular and why we urge those new to blogging to consider at the least consuming or even better creating their own content online. This particular ‘genre’ of blogging has been coined ‘Blogademia’ by Saper (2006), who first used the term as a way to explain academic blogging. Setting up and curating a blog can be done relatively easily with the aid of a variety of platforms, from WordPress and Blogger to Quora and Postach. A blog is a series of entries of information presented in reverse chronological order that are generally shared publicly, although it is possible to restrict readership. These can be posts either from an individual or from groups of individuals and range from commentary on research to personal reflections. Some blogs combine a mixture of the two. The aim of this article is to offer some reflections on the purpose, positives and pitfalls of blogging, moving on to some general tips and guidance on blogging specifically for psychologists. **What are the benefits of blogging?**

Writing a blog can offer the author various personal and professional benefits. The first is the ability to be able use blogging as a way to ‘make notes’ and formulate ideas, whilst at the same time developing a writing habit and refining writing skills. Recording ideas in a blog post prompts you to write in a clear and accessible style, whilst also allowing you to return to these ideas at a later date. Blogs can be used to share and formulate ideas during development of projects, exploration of a new research area, or in relation to new methods or techniques. Moreover, by using blogging as a way to formulate ideas, it can be used as a

means for self-reflection. This is particularly useful when considering teaching courses such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PCTHE) where some tutors encourage participants to reflect on their teaching via blogs. For example, the 'blogfolio' web-based learning portfolio approach reported by Tang Lin, Kuo and Yuan (2007), where a blog platform extends the key functions of the learning portfolio to collect, select, reflect, project and respect (Barrett, 2003), as well as promoting publicity, networking and collaborative learning.

Similarly, blogging can be a way to seek, share and exchange ideas. Most bloggers enable the comment function on their blogs, thus allowing readers to leave reactions, opinions and responses to the piece that can promote further discussion. This can open up dialogue between authors and readers and can facilitate a unique opportunity for the exchange of ideas made possible by online platforms. These ideas could be new directions for research, or indeed just a new perspective on your research that you may have not previously considered. Blogging is also ideal for building and maintaining networks with others in the field and developing a sense of community (Kirkup, 2010). Researchers or practitioners with shared interests can engage in further discussion via a blog that may promote future creative ideas for research and practice. Blogs also allow collaborations to develop and can enable projects that transcend traditional barriers such as geographical distance, as well as offering asynchronous discussion regardless of time zones or incompatible diaries. Community members may have previously met at a conference or other event, or the contact may solely be due to the blog itself.

For readers, blogs offer an ideal medium for digesting psychological research in both your own and other areas. We have all experienced that academic papers – whilst clearly informative and mostly interesting – can sometimes be long and onerous to read and take in. A blog post is a perfect source to provide a summary of the piece. Indeed, one of the authors

of this piece uses his blog for this purpose. Readers can relatively easily digest a piece of research that may have taken longer to fully read and engage with. You may also be able to access summaries of research via blogs based on full articles that are behind a pay-wall. Gregg (2006) proposes that this type of blogging can be seen as ‘conversational scholarship’ and enables academics to write in a less formal style. This opens up psychological research and practice to a much broader audience, making it accessible to the wider public, who do not tend to have access to journal articles.

Blogging is also an effective way of increasing your professional profile, whatever career level or stage you are at. For example, blogs can showcase areas of expertise and involvement for those seeking to improve their career prospects, as rightly or wrongly - employers increasingly use information available online about applicants in a process known as ‘cybervetting’ (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). Blogs can give the employer a clear indication of your research, practice or professional expertise that goes beyond a standard employer website entry – that is, of course if your blog is about your research and not personal reflections on looking after your cats. We touch upon the issue of purpose later in this piece.

No available research to date has explored the *impact* of blogs, which is especially important when our ability to demonstrate the impact of our activity receives heightened emphasis, in research, teaching, academia and professional practice. It is unclear what the public – or indeed, employers - think of blogging and whether it does have ‘impact’. It can nonetheless help get your name and area of expertise or interest out there. For example, if your area of work is Googled and your name appears near the top of the search results, this is the perfect demonstration of your active participation in the field.

Once you have developed your blog, this can lead to other opportunities, such as being asked to be a guest contributor on a larger blog, or even being commissioned to write

pieces. Whilst this may seem a long way off for those yet to try blogging, this is a real possibility if you start today. The exposure to such wide and varied audiences offered by a blog is unique and may be a stepping-stone to bigger things. There is clearly a myriad of potential positives offered by blogging, but lets return to the question of what is the purpose of a blog?

Purpose to blogging

People blog for various reasons, with key motivations including: sharing personal revelations, an emotional or creative outlet, selective disclosure, social networking, and advertising (Fullwood, Nicholls, & Makichi, 2014). These have been summarised under five key functions: identity, sharing, social interaction and community, benefit and need, and society and social order (Matikainen, 2015). For those studying, teaching or practicing psychology, blogs can be an outlet for research related content, reflections on your personal or academic life (e.g., a PhD journey), or a combination of several different functions. It is possible to find popular examples of each of these different types of blogs with a simple Google search. What they all have in common is that they are an outlet for the author to share and write about their interests and invite comments, opinions and endorsements from others. As a blog author (or one of a team of curators), you are in control of the blog's direction and focus. This is therefore something that you need to decide when the blog is first formed – it may even affect the name of the blog and how it is presented and publicised.

Blog audiences vary depending on the purpose of the blog. If you are blogging about a specific area of research for example, it is unlikely to receive a wide general and diverse readership, such as Babel's Dawn, which explores the origins of language. If you are blogging about psychology more generally (such as the Research Digest), you are naturally going to interest a more diverse range of people who will read and engage with your blog. Depending on whom you choose to write for, you may want to tailor your blog specifically to

that particular audience. With that said however, Mewburn and Thomson (2013) analysed the content of 100 academic blogs and most appeared to be written with other higher education staff in mind.

Blogging enables academics to critique the state of academia or practice more generally and offer some of their own more personal thoughts on the issues. A specific example is where blogs allow discussions of published papers. These discussions were formerly housed within letters to the journal itself that published the paper. Journals then typically published these letters as a response. Today, these discussions occur in the online world, via blogs and ‘micro blogging’ sites such as Twitter. Some academics are uneasy with this as they feel these discussions should remain in peer-reviewed outlets – however, these types of discussions are already happening online and are increasing. We may move towards a time where the expectation is that following publication, informal discussion on the paper will occur. This would work well with open access publication. Engaging online in this manner also makes it possible for such discussions to occur in a more much effective way, with an almost ‘live’ and interactive conversation occurring on a blog post (see Shema, Barllan, & Thelwall for an example).

Blogging can highlight – or “whistle blow”, unethical practices in the discipline. Professor Dorothy Bishop recently discussed the issue of “editors behaving badly” in her blog (<http://deevybee.blogspot.co.uk/>). Prof. Bishop reported on her blog an analysis of publications in a group of journals, which then drew attention to and opened up an important debate regarding the editors’ malpractices at this journal. These examples clearly highlight the varying purposes of a blog and the value it can offer the author as well as wider academic and practising communities.

What are the pitfalls to blogging?

Alongside the benefits, there are however some pitfalls that should be considered. The first is the time commitment that is required. In our own recent survey of UK psychologists' blogging practices (Davies, Jolley, & Coiffait, in prep) respondents cited concerns about the time commitment required for maintaining a blog as one of the main reasons for not blogging. The amount of time it takes to create a blog post will vary person to person and this skill can be refined over time. We suggest that you reserve a block of time for writing and proof-editing your post. Creating blog content can take time away from your other competing commitments and time that may otherwise have been spent writing for peer-reviewed publication or working as a practitioner. Employers may or may not be supportive of this and you might have to restrict your blogging activity to your own time. However, blogging is a valuable teaching and learning tool that you can use both for your own benefit (e.g., to meet CPD requirements and remain up to date with the evidence base) and also the benefit of others (e.g., to share with students, supervisees and others). With that said, blogging is also an effective way of exercising your writing muscles that is likely to be beneficial for writing other types of content in the long-run.

A further issue to consider is the potential negative reception you may receive from others in relation to your blog. When sharing content on a blog, by its very nature it becomes public and is exposed to the interpretation and opinion of others. In most cases if comments are enabled, people will comment on the post. Some of these will be positive but there is always the possibility that these will be negative. This can be particularly pronounced if the post is on a topical or controversial subject, such as conspiracy theories. With this in mind, some authors blog anonymously, thus limiting the personal 'trolling' that they could receive. A caveat, however, is that whilst blogging anonymously, you may be identifiable from the content of your posts. This happened with the anonymous clinical psychology blog "Confessions of a reserve list jockey". The blog provided an 'insider' insight into the

profession written by someone working in and aspiring to train in clinical psychology. The blog content was honest and sometimes controversial and the author of the blog was eventually identified by senior work colleagues. As a consequence of this unmasking, they are likely to have got into hot water with their employer, as this blog no longer exists.

Reputational issues must also therefore be considered with regard to potential pitfalls. Consider whether you blog as 'self as self', 'self as employee' or 'self as practitioner'. Being clear of the purpose of the blog at the beginning, will direct what you can say and what you must avoid. Referring back to the example above, whilst the blogger was posting anonymously, they were still blogging as 'self as employee' and their identity was uncovered. In a similar vein, blogging as 'self as employee' has recently been dealt with head-on by a major academic body, the International Studies Association (ISA) who have proposed banning editors from blogging. They suggested that banning blogging would mean that the journal maintained a professional tone. The ISA suggested that confusion could arise from people misidentifying personal blogs as a reflection of editorial policies. Regardless of whether you agree with these sentiments or not, it is worthwhile checking your employer's policy on such activities. To avoid any potential issues, be clear on your blog's purpose, and if you do decide to blog as 'self as employee', it is very important that you are mindful of what you cannot say – whether blogging anonymously, or not.

A final consideration for practitioner psychologists is that you may not want service users to see a particular post due to the potential impact on the therapeutic relationship, so an anonymous blog may be more appropriate if blogging as 'self as therapist'. With that said, blogging anonymously is not foolproof, and you must put things in place to protect yourself as much as you can. It is important that anyone thinking of blogging remembers to maintain the confidentiality of other people who may be mentioned in blog posts, unless they have given their explicit permission for this information to be shared in a public forum. In any

case, this is a consideration that the author needs to make when they set up the blog: whether to post anonymously or not.

Tips and guidance on blogging

After exploring both the benefits and pitfalls of blogging, a number of personal and professional issues have been considered for psychologists thinking about blogging. It is crucial to remember that the purpose and the audience of the blog go hand-in-hand. If you want your blog to gather attention for a wide range of people, the content needs to be written in a general, accessible, engaging, easy to understand style, with a punchy title. Writing about something very specific (i.e., the psychological aspects of adolescent alcohol use) may only interest a particular subset of people. However, if that is the focus of the blog from the outset, then you are writing with your audience in mind and this is recommended. It is important, however, to be able to generate sufficient regular content on your blog to attract people to return for future visits.

Along a similar vein, your blog posts should be consistent with its purpose. If at the outset you decide it will be research focused, but after a period of time you include some more personal reflections on unrelated topics, this may confuse your readership and dilute the specific content that may have brought them to your blog. If your blog set out to be a mixture of the two from the outset, the expectations of your readers would be different. It is easier to lose readers than gain them, so be mindful of this. Be careful with any promises or expectations you set up - if you have stated that you will be uploading posts every week on a Tuesday, you need to make sure you stick with this timeframe. Be honest with your readers.

Being mindful of whom you are writing as (e.g., 'self as self' and 'self as employee') has emerged as a key theme in this piece. In some instances however, you may unknowingly write something controversial that gains unwanted attention. Even if you have built up a

successful online presence, one wrong word or sentence could be taken another way than intended. If this happens you need to be confident enough to deal with the resulting situation. This could involve writing an apology post where you explain your intended meaning, or indeed engage with readers on the blog post itself to try and alleviate the negativity.

Whilst you may clearly blog as ‘self as self’, your comments may still be taken as though you are writing as ‘self as employee’. The opening line of William Patry’s 2008 blog stated clearly “please don’t attribute anything in the blog... to Google, which employs me”, yet news stories mentioning his blog still opened with “William Patry, Google’s Senior Copyright Counsel said...”. On his final post before shutting down his blog, William expressed that there was nothing he could do to stop this implication, other than to stop blogging. This highlights that even despite clarity from the outset regarding the blog’s purpose (i.e., ‘self as self’), these risks may still be a problem depending on the topic of your blog – indeed, a concern raised by ISA earlier in this piece. Whilst a drastic solution; shutting down your blog is one way to deal with any reputational risks. It is also worth reflecting on the purpose of your blog and discussing the issue with your employer, as well as deciding if you could turn your posts into ‘self as employee’. Seeking appropriate confidential arenas outside of your blog to discuss frustrations and sensitive issues is also important, such as peer supervision or a formal meeting with your employer through the appropriate channels.

With the purpose set aside, the best blogs tend to be the ones that are short (we suggest this could be around 500 words) as opposed to extended essays. You must balance getting the right amount of information, but not overwhelming and losing the attention of your reader. Creating blog content does not necessarily need to be a solo activity. There are numerous examples of group blogs involving several authors providing different pieces and perspectives on the same topic. One of the authors of this piece is a part of a team blogging about the psychology of conspiracy theories. There are also opportunities on larger blogs

(e.g., the Mental Elf blog) to be a guest blogger, where it is possible for you to write a couple of posts on a particular topic. Working in a team not only distributes the pressure of creating content regularly, but also enables ideas to be discussed as a team before they are published. This can help with both the time commitment involved, and allow you to get feedback on your ideas before they are made public. It can also be a great way to have other people spell check and proofread your post. Bad spelling and grammar give a bad impression and may lead readers to question your professionalism and credibility. It is also a good idea to double check that your post cannot be interpreted in a way not originally intended, particularly if you are blogging as ‘self as employee’.

When you write your blog post and make it live to the public, you need to tell people about it! Whilst not the topic of this piece, having a social media account (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) that you are able to publicise your blog on is going to help bring in the readers to your newly published post. Put your blog website address on your email signature, business cards and CV. At conferences, promote any of your blog posts relevant to material you present using the conference Twitter hashtag (e.g., #DCPconf) to publicise it to the delegates attending so they can find out further information about your work. You could also refer conference attendees to your blog for further detail at the end of a conference poster or presentation. We have had success putting all of these suggestions into practice!

As your blog becomes more successful, readers may find it more easily, but in the early days, you will need to actively publicise it within your networks. People who may be potential readers need to know that the blog exists and where to find it. Publicising other people’s blogs by linking to them in your own blog posts is a great way to raise your profile as other bloggers are likely to return the favour. Making sure you ‘tag’ your content correctly is also an ingredient to success – this involves assigning a category and keywords to your

post, which allows Google to pick up the post and display it in any searches for those terms and include it in its rankings.

Finally, as already mentioned, if you enable the comment feature (which is recommended), you may receive both positive and negative feedback on your posts. You can delete the negativity, or the alternative is to respond constructively and explain your views. You can of course decide not to respond to any comments (positive or negative) – but as highlighted in the section detailing the benefits of blogging, by engaging in discussion you can allow your network to flourish and further ideas to develop. In any case, the potential for negativity on your blog should not be a reason to put you off engaging with your blog. It must also be borne in mind that ‘trolls’ deliberately post inflammatory comments in order to provoke a response and it is best to ignore or delete these rather than reinforce their attempts.

Conclusion

Blogs represent a popular and accessible medium that is here to stay and their success is only going to continue grow. This is evident with the recent BPS Public Engagement and Media Award going in 2015 to Mindhacks. A blog is a dynamic, interactive online platform that allows authors to exchange ideas and to develop research networks and communities of practice. Blogs can also function as a personal and/or professional development activity enabling the author to create a space to self-reflect on their research, practice and experiences. Blogging is not without pitfalls, such as time and potential negative feedback. You also need to be mindful of any reputational risks, and if you are blogging as ‘self as employee’, know what you can and cannot say. We believe, however, that the benefits far outweigh the negatives. With this in mind, we urge you to explore blogging for yourself. Dip your toe in by checking out the BPS Research Digest blog, or if you already have a blog that you’d like to share with fellow psychologists, tweet @psychmag using the hashtag #psychbloggers

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