

# As academic blogging becomes mainstream, science communication must facilitate depth and breadth in online discourse.

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*Having recently attended a conference session on the role of online forums for science communication, [Alan Cann](#) reflects on the extent to which academic blogging is currently embedded in academic practice. Blogs are still the centre of serious online academic communication but there is still a long way to go until the Republic of Blogs is established and academic blogging moves from being a spare time activity to a mainstream output.*



The [SpotOn London](#) conference, formerly called Science Online London, has just run for the sixth time. Held at the British Library and sponsored by Digital Science, The Wellcome Trust and a number of other high tech, high profile sponsors, SpotOn London (or #solo13 as it is more widely known) is both the flagship event for current science communication and collaboration and represents the cutting edge of developments in the way science is being conducted. The three official strands at the meeting, science communication and outreach, online tools and digital publishing, and science policy, reflect the interest and enthusiasms of those involved.

I have been fortunate enough to be involved with all six Science Online London meetings. Although I was not physically present at the first Science Blogging conference at the Royal Institution in 2008 I spent a day following the event online – my first exposure to how new media were [changing academic life](#). The feeling of excitement around the emerging tools – Friendfeed (precursor of the present day Facebook interface), Twitter, informal video livestreams (from people’s phones and of varying degrees of reliability), and aggregation of discussions from blogs, Flickr, etc – had sufficient impact to shape my thinking about and approach to online communication, as well as my own academic practices.

As a grizzled veteran, #solo13 inevitably didn’t have the same impact for me that some of the earlier meetings did. This is just part of the natural cycle of exposure – adoption – commonplace with emerging technologies. What was noticeable at #solo13 was the emergence of a younger demographic of PhD students and science communicators experiencing it all for the first time. I don’t intend to try to cover all the content and discussion from this packed two day event in a single post, but I would like to describe some of my reactions to the [“Using blogs and other online forums for communication between scientists”](#) session held on the second day. You can watch a video recording of the whole session online:

As I commented during the session, I’m a serial blogger who couldn’t stop if I wanted to. In fact, the only major change I could envisage in my blogging practice might be to obscure my identity when writing about certain topics – more of this later. I currently maintain five active blogs. My personal blog, [Science of the Invisible](#), is where I write about my educational research and professional life, but also share more personal (but not intimate) content such as recipes and commentary. [MicrobiologyBytes](#) is my oldest continuous blog, and writing about microbiology online helps me stay up to date for my teaching and my personal interest in science communication now that I am officially no longer “research active” in this field (which is a reflection of grant income rather than the end of my scholarship). I am the Internet Consulting editor for Annals of Botany, responsible for social media policy, and [our blog](#) at is very much a team effort aimed at promoting the content in the journal, but also awareness of plant science to a more general audience. [@leBioscience](#) is the online shop window for the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Leicester, the 21st century equivalent of the staff newsletter we used to distribute in print 20 years ago. My student support blog is both a content management system and an authoring tool for advice and guidance to the students I teach, and this growing personal repository of information saves me endless amounts of time by allowing

me to refer frequently asked questions to this resource rather than to have to answer each one anew. In addition to this core, project blogs and grant blogs come and go with fixed lifespans as dissemination tools and archives for particular projects. You get the idea....

With this history, it was hard for me to resist a gentle smile at the panel member who introduced themselves with the line “I’ve been blogging for two months”, but at the same time, it was encouraging that there is more of an acceptance of blogging as an important academic tool. Unlike the Science Blogging 2008 meeting, there is now a feeling of establishment rather than revolution about blogging – part of the process of scholarship, but particularly with regard to individual development rather than as an institutionally-owned process. Few academic institutions actively encourage their staff to blog and there remains a justified wariness of the possible consequences of being judged to have fritted away valuable time which could have been “better” spent on traditionally mainstream academic activities. Across a wider sector, Marketing still retain control of blogging in many organizations and we have still to fully realize the benefits that can arise from reflective cross-institutional communication and knowledge exchange which can arise from a blogging culture. At a simple level, it would be easy for institutions to encourage more staff to blog by simply providing the tools – for example, a site-wide installation of WordPress available to all. Moving beyond that to a culture where blogging is the norm rather than is much more complex and not as easy to achieve. In a time of financial stringency, senior academic management will need to provide the lead in such matters in order to enable this sort of change.



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There is also something of a pervasive feeling of weariness around blogging. There appear to be some bloggers who don't enjoy the process but do it out of a sense of obligation or not wanting to miss out. Blogging is still a peripheral rather than a core (paid) activity for most. For me, blogging is fun (although not always enjoyable, and not as much fun as teaching, with which it overlaps) – blogging is not my day job, so it's something I'm often doing in the early hours of the morning or in snatched minutes between meetings if I can get my brain in gear. If the reward is not financial nor much institutional credit for most, what keeps academic bloggers going? One common experience at the meeting was of colleagues and students who read your blog secretly, then come up to you at some point and say “I read your blog”. It doesn't count as REF impact, but this peer acknowledgement is a significant personal reward. If your institution does not provide the platform, other sites such as the Huffington Post, The Guardian and New Statesman all accept guest posts, and if you have the time and talent to get your writing accepted by such sites it will certainly attract attention within your institution and from future employers.

The issue of commenting on blogs was also discussed in the session. For most blogs, comments are dead and any conversation is now based around is now retweets and reposts to social media sites rather than a threaded stream on the original site. The same is also true of online commenting on scientific papers – on the PLOS and Nature websites for example. There is plenty of discussion going on about the content, but it is distributed across many networks rather than being focussed into an easily accessible thread. In spite of a relaxed attitude to this by some, in my opinion this is a problem as it encourages superficial commenting at the expense of more in depth conversation. Sharing on Facebook is a good thing but it is not a substitute for a good discussion thread on a thorny issue. In science in particular, putting your head above the parapet and being seen to criticise the work of senior scientists is still a risky business, even when such comments are made in neutral tones and intended as a positive contribution to ongoing work.

Overall, I came away from this session feeling buoyed up by the discussion. A blog is not a book or a newspaper, but it is more than a Twitter account or a Facebook page. Blogs are still the centre of serious online academic communication but there is still a long way to go until the Republic of Blogs is established and academic blogging

moves from being a spare time activity to a mainstream output. I'm delighted to have been asked to contribute this guest post to the LSE Impact blog and I intend to expand my guest blogging activity as time permits. Sleep is over rated anyway.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the Author**

**Alan Cann** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Leicester. His interests are science education and exploiting emerging social technologies to enhance student and researcher development. He is the author of two textbooks, has served on the editorial boards of several scientific and educational journals, and is serial blogger. He has worked as a consultant for numerous educational and scientific institutions, and has published extensively in the area of educational research and social technologies. See: <http://bit.ly/AJCann>

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