

Why blog?

Posted by Jean Adams

It seems an odd thing to write a blog post about the value of blogging. I mean, if you're reading this blog, it suggests you place some sort of value on the medium. Or maybe, you don't really but you came to my presentation today on blogging and felt some vague compulsion/interest in following up the link on the handout just this once, seeing as it was such a funky little handout.

What is a blog? What's it for?

If this really is your first visit to a blog, let me tell you a bit about it and show you around.

Blogs (a contraction of web logs) are web-sites, or parts of web-sites, that are designed to be regularly updated with new content, including text, images, audio and video content. Entries, or 'posts', are presented in reverse chronological order with the most recent first. By providing a facility for readers to comment, and writers to respond to readers' comments, blogs provide a forum for interactive discussion. Blogs can be single or multi-author and about anything and everything.

This page is mostly text. But we try to include either still or video images with every post. If you scroll down a bit, you'll find previous posts. And even older ones if you scroll right to the bottom and click 'older posts'.

You can see that posts are written by a variety of different people – this is a multi-author blog. Anyone affiliated with Fuse can post and we also accept guest posts from people not affiliated. At the bottom of each post, there's a little note highlighting either that there are currently 'no comments' or maybe '23 comments'. We haven't quite cracked the 'interactive discussion' bit here, but if you'd like to help overcome that you just need to click on the 'no comments' link and let rip. This is the internet, so we use links within posts to source material, or more information on various concepts, rather than a list of references at the bottom of posts.

To the right of the main text, you can see some other stuff introducing the blog and what it's about, listing previous posts, and bigging up our besties. There's also some Twitter and social network sharing stuff there. We publicise the blog primarily through Twitter. If you're new to blogs, a good way to find out about new posts is to follow me (@jeanmadams) or @fuse_online on Twitter.

The majority of mainstream science communication follows a formal, and often highly structured, format. In contrast, blogs allow scientists and researchers to be both authoritative and informal. In blogs the personality of a researcher can shine through in a way that it rarely does in peer-reviewed publications and traditional science journalism. For this reason, science blogs have been proposed as "one way to demythologize science".

Fuse is a Public Health Research Centre of Excellence that brings together academics and researchers from five universities in the North East of England. One of Fuse’s key aims is to engage with those working in public health policy and practice across the region (policy and practice ‘partners’) to conduct research with and for these groups, and to ensure translation of research findings into policy and practice.

We set up the Fuse Blog because, although awareness of Fuse seemed high locally, understanding of what exactly it does and how, appeared limited. We were also concerned about a feeling that Fuse researchers were perceived by policy and practice partners as a bit far removed from the real world, up in their ivory towers. Finally, we wanted a method to build some sort of community across a research centre that is located in five different universities at some geographical distance from each other.

To achieve these things, posts tend to be about the day-to-day realities of doing public health research, written in a way that hopefully makes us look human. But we also sometimes post what might be considered lay summaries of our research findings and accessible discussions of recent research developments.

Why should I bother blogging?

I asked my Twitter followers why they blogged. These are some of the responses I got:

I think that the reasons that a researcher might want to blog can be broken into three areas: personal, professional and organisational.

From a personal point of view, I quite enjoy blogging. Like Bronia, I like having an opportunity to write about the things that matter to be but that I can’t put in academic papers. It can be quite cathartic. I also like the people that I’ve met – both in person, and virtually – through blogging. I’m quite a shy person underneath, so this medium suits me well.



Professionally, Sherry and Lynne cover some of the important points. Blogging is a form of engagement that allows researchers to speak to people they often can’t access through

traditional dissemination routes, about things those routes don't generally cover. On the blog, I am Jean. It's fine for Jean to discuss the everyday realities of doing public health research and to chat about her research. Most other public places I go in a professional capacity, I am Dr Adams. From her you get cautious interpretation of her latest peer-reviewed findings.

This sort of engagement ticks boxes in terms of communicating the method of science. But it is also considered a moral duty by some: if the public fund our research through government agencies, don't we have a duty to tell them about it in a way they might understand?

As Lynne says, blogging is also a good way to get into writing – a skill that every researcher needs. It's quick (we normally say 5-800 words for a post, but this one is rapidly breaking the rules, but I'm the editor, so that's fine) and it doesn't have to be perfect (I seem to have identified a number of post-publication typos...).

Organisationally, the most important thing that the Fuse blog might have done is make us a bit more democratic. Our posts tend to be written by early career researchers who often don't speak up in other forums. As one professor eloquently put it, the blog gives a voice to those who are too often voiceless in our organisation.

In turn, this gives a good impression of Fuse to the outside world: we're the sort of organisation who aren't afraid to let our early career staff and students speak out and we support them to do that. The blog also means we have a constantly updated web presence. It says: we are flourishing.

But...what about all the bad stuff?

Obviously you should be aware of the risks of anything before you start. Simon Wren-Lewis from Oxford University offers sound responses to many of the risks you might think blogging has, from not having enough time, to not having anything to say. With a multi-author blog like the Fuse blog we easily absorb many of these. Matt Might from the University of Utah also offers some good tips on low-effort blog post strategies – if you're going to write a presentation for a departmental seminar on blogging, write a blog post about it.

With a central editor (me) who scrutinises all posts before they go live we also add an additional layer of checking to the 'read it again in the morning' strategy used by Wren-Lewis. We err on the side of caution and if there's anything I think you might live to regret posting, I'll talk to you about it. But that rarely happens – researchers live and breathe confidentiality and professionalism.

No...I meant: what will people think?

Well, what do you think? Do you think that researchers and academics writing about their day-to-day working lives in non-peer-reviewed publications is 'vulgar'? Do you think Athene Donald, professor of physics at Cambridge University and Fellow of the Royal Society is 'showing off' in her blog? Do you think Trish Greenhalgh, professor of primary health care at Queen Mary, who contributes to many multi-author blogs has 'too much time on her hands'? Most people probably think the same way you do.

Source: <http://fuseopenscienceblog.blogspot.com/2013/01/why-blog.html>