

# Will Science Blast into the Blogosphere?

Interactive online sites known as weblogs are one of a number of personal publishing tools that are currently propelling science communication towards uncharted territory. Weblogs allow researchers to share and debate data both before and after publication, and can reach a wider readership than many specialist journals. Blogging is part of a wider movement in which the Internet is changing from an online library into a highly interactive ‘social web’.<sup>1</sup>

## The big bang

Despite their relatively recent emergence, weblogs are fast becoming an established part of online culture and their popularity is skyrocketing. During 2004, weblog readership increased by 58% in the United States.<sup>2</sup> By mid-2005, a new weblog was being created every 7.4 seconds<sup>3</sup> and the current total is thought to exceed 20 million sites.<sup>1</sup> A few pioneering scientists are championing personal weblogs as a means to communicate rapidly and collaboratively with a diverse audience, spark debate, promote a sense of unity among researchers and increase general scientific awareness,<sup>4</sup> but the community as a whole is approaching this technology with caution.

The power of weblogs is that millions of individuals can easily publish their ideas, allowing mil-

lions more to comment on them.<sup>2</sup> Entries are generally connected to other relevant posts and online resources, and are followed by a ‘comment’ button inviting responses. Weblogs created by individuals or groups can easily be crosslinked to create online communities.<sup>5</sup> RSS feeds can even deliver details of the latest postings direct to subscribers’ home computers and handheld devices.



Image posted to Flickr 8 February 2006 by Kevin Lim:  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/inju/97426906/>

## To blog or not to blog?

So why are there so few scientific bloggers? Individual scientists might be reluctant to jump on the blogging bandwagon for fear of damaging their credibility and career prospects, or being scooped by rivals. Indeed, weblogs are viewed by some as distractions from real work — the online equivalent of coffee-room chatter.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, many scientists are currently blogging anonymously.

Yet scientists who frequent the so-called blogosphere argue that weblogs are a great way of keeping up to date with hot topics in science, and offer a forum for real-time discussion that can run alongside traditional peer-reviewed journals. Some academic researchers are experimenting with weblogs as a way of sharing laboratory data, and more sophisticated tools are becoming available to help organize this information.

## The impact on science publishers

Although peer-reviewed publication is undoubtedly the ‘gold standard’ in scientific communication, blogging has the potential to give a boost to traditional journals. For example, posting research findings on a weblog can give free access to a diverse audience and allow instant feedback.

Several publishers are now beginning to explore the possibilities of this technology. In most cases, weblogs are written by a journal’s staff, with contributions from published authors and experts in the field. The weblog format allows editors and readers to collaborate in discussing hot topics and putting new research into a broader context. In addition, authors can follow up on points that could not be included in their published manuscripts.

The first weblogs to be launched by science publishers appeared in

autumn 2004. These included the companion weblog to *Science Magazine*'s Functional Genomics website, [SFGblog](#), which carries molecular biology and genomics postings. Hot on its heels was [The American Journal of Bioethics](#) companion weblog, which has been credited with allowing the journal to respond faster to public controversies, and even to influence mainstream media reporting on ethical issues.<sup>1</sup>

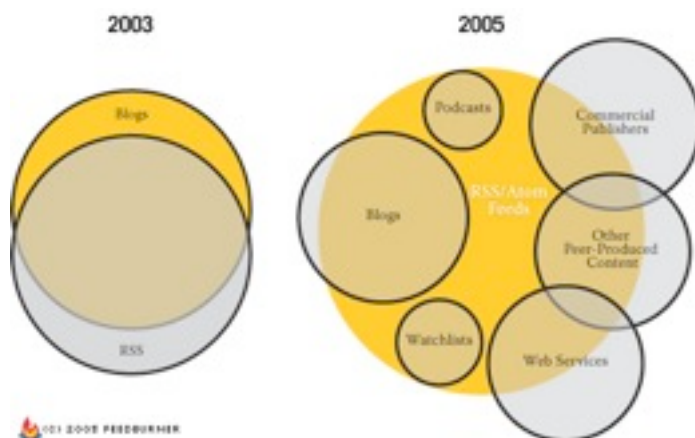
This year saw the launch of [OUP blog](#) by Oxford University Press, which provides daily commentary on a wide spectrum of subjects, including science. In addition, three Nature Publishing Group weblogs went live in November 2005: [Nas-](#)

[cent](#), written by the Web Publishing Team, with the stated mission of "apply[ing] web technologies in new ways that promote the discovery and dissemination of scientific knowledge"; [Free Association](#), written by the editors of *Nature Genetics*; and [Action Potential](#), written by the editors of *Nature Neuroscience* (see our [New Publications](#) page for a brief review).

### The blogosphere and beyond

The academic status of weblog postings remains unclear, and questions abound as to how they should be cited and archived. Implementing a formal peer-review process might help the scientific community to accept weblogs as supplements to traditional forms of academic discourse.

So will the future see a weblog accompanying every published scientific paper, with scientists regularly debating the latest research in real time on journal homepages?<sup>3</sup> Only time will tell. What is clear is that the experiences of the current pioneers are sure to influence whether science weblogs fizzle out or take off with a bang in the coming year.



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Image uploaded to Flickr 24 November 2005 by Tama Leaver From [Feedburner's November 21, 2005 RSS and Blogs report](#).

### References

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### Blog Search Engines

Given the proliferation of blogs, it is often hard to keep track of all those that may be relevant to a particular topic. The search engines listed below work on the same principle as the major web searches, ranking blogs according to the number of sites that link to them. Some also incorporate the principle of tags that can be added by users. Once you have identified relevant blogs most can be subscribed to, so that updates will appear in your RSS reader.

\*[BlogPulse](#): This search engine focuses on 'trends', unrestricted keywords. Searching on a trend yields a graph mapping the discussion that has taken place around this theme over the period specified in the search query. Clicking on any part of this graph takes the user to the discussion taking place at that point. Another useful tool for those concerned about the origins of blog-derived data allows readers to find out more about the identity of the authors of a particular blog.

\*[Blogz](#): A search engine that finds posts according to keyword. It also ranks blogs according to popularity.

\*[Bloglines](#): Bloglines, an aggregator as well as search engine, also incorporates some of the new social bookmarking technology. By creating a (free) profile, you can choose to share your subscriptions with others or to keep them personal.

\*[Google Blog Search](#): Google extends its usual format to blogs, allowing the user to narrow the search down to words in a blog or subject title, as well as to post within a specific date range.

\*[PubSub](#): As well as storing blogs in your account, which can be keyworded for retrieval, PubSub offers the option of a sidebar for which the user specifies topics. Links to articles matching these topics then automatically appear in this bar as they are published.

\*[Technorati](#): Technorati searches on tags as well as keywords, which can be useful to avoid retrieving throw-away references to your search terms.