

North Carolina sewer by attempting to identify it — and to therefore dispel the notion that it was “a mysterious alien creature here to suck out our brains”. The humorous style was intentional. “The public has a very narrow view of how scientists act, look and behave, and I wanted a blog that helped dispel the staid stereotype,” says McClain. It worked. His blog gets, on average, 2,000–3,000 hits a day, a lot for an independent blog site. “If people are entertained, they come back for more,” he says.

BLOGGERS BEWARE

Scientists actively cultivating a web presence should, however, tread carefully — it is difficult to remove something once it has been enmeshed in the blogosphere. “The Internet is forever. People should keep in mind that when you blog or tweet something, it becomes Google-able,” says Goldman, who has had guest blogs on *The Guardian* and *Scientific American*’s ‘Mind Matters’ blog.

And not all blogs have the same aims. Dennis Meredith, author of *Explaining Research: How to Reach Key Audiences to Advance Your Work* (Oxford University Press, 2010), says that would-be bloggers should first answer one question: will this blog be useful? The best blogs are those with a unique perspective that draws a readership the blogger deems worthy of the time and energy invested (see ‘Tips for successful blogs’).

Crafting an engaging and appropriate voice is the key to success. John Hawks, a palaeoanthropologist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, developed rules for his blog through trial and error. After upsetting some colleagues with his cutting criticism of the science in a newly published paper, Hawks learned to rein in his comments. “I realized I had a bigger voice and needed to respectfully air comments and critiques of research,” he says.

Bloggers should realize that readers visit a site to be entertained, but also to engage in conversation, says Teresa Nielsen Hayden, the moderator for Macmillan’s online sites and former editor at the group blog known as BoingBoing. She says the key to self-sustaining conversation is having readers feel a sense of investment in the site. Bloggers might reward insightful comments by highlighting or linking back to them in subsequent posts.

Unfortunately, however, not all comments are useful, or even respectful. In

those instances, Nielsen Hayden opts to ‘disemvowel’, or remove the vowels from, rude posts. Bloggers have every right to remove unhelpful comments, she says. They should also read the comments left on their blog, says Nielsen Hayden. “You can’t throw a party and not attend it.” But that takes time — and that’s where Twitter’s swift tempo can trump a blog.

For some scientists, Twitter serves as a filter whereby respected tweeters post links to studies, articles or conference presentations that might pique scientists’ interest or even help to advance research aims. “It’s the meta-information that Twitter carries that is so important,” says Paul Filmer, programme director for the Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research, based in Arlington, Virginia, part of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Filmer administers the NSF and Voyager2 Twitter feeds. Other scientists may fail to see the point of messages that cannot be longer than Twitter’s limit of 140 characters.

“It’s easy to mock the idea of Twitter,” says Tobis, “with its silly name and teenagers reporting on what they had for lunch. But many scientists underestimate the extent to which casual background communication can help to identify trends and get quick questions answered.” He once used Twitter to find out the relaxation time constant for ocean acidification as a result of a carbon dioxide perturbation, an obscure topic not well-attuned to a simple Google search. McClain says Twitter has helped him to form “an extended journal club in a virtual space with colleagues from all over the world”.

The key is choosing wisely whom to follow. For example, leaders in a particular field often have advance notice of high-impact papers or job advertisements, access to which can be priceless. And scientists not using social media may be missing out on opportunities — without even realizing it. “Grant-making agencies, such as the NSF, are learning how to diffuse opportunities through these types of networks to reach the best and brightest,” says Filmer. An NSF tweet on 14 March, for example, alerted undergraduates to an opportunity to submit a two-minute video describing an original energy-innovation idea; the best will be aired on a special Weather Channel programme. What is more, use of Twitter and other social media can have tangible career-promoting results. “I can’t count the number of conference invitations that have come from people finding me online,” says Hawks.

It is possible to get too immersed, some note — there is no substitute for face time and real-world conversations. “The virtual world doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” says Habib. “The ‘virtual’ world and the ‘real’ world complement each other — and it’s important to tend to both.” ■

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EUROPEAN UNION

Funding revamp urged

The next European Union (EU) framework for research funding, which will start in 2014, must adopt simpler scientific and financial reporting processes, says a group of EU universities. In a report out on 14 March, the League of European Research Universities (LERU) in Leuven, Belgium, said that current rules — which require researchers to provide detailed time sheets and financial audits — should be streamlined. Researchers in countries with good accounting practices should be permitted to use those systems. Katrien Maes, LERU chief policy officer, says that the European Commission has been receptive to the recommendations.

GENDER POLICY

Equity rising at MIT

A report from the School of Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge shows how policies have helped to increase the proportion of women from 8% to 19% of faculty members between 1995 and 2010. Rectifying salary inequities and extending the tenure clock after birth or adoption of a child have helped, says Hazel Sive, an MIT biologist. Most faculty members approved of the efforts, but some worried that women get preferential hiring treatment. Deans have pledged to address the potential for bias. The report, out on 21 March, says that because committees have fewer female than male researchers to draw from, equal-representation policies lead to women’s time being taken up disproportionately. It recommends improved mentoring for junior faculty members, access to childcare and systems to deal with gender-based harassment.

DEVELOPMENT

City seeks facility bids

New York City is looking for a partner for an applied-science facility that will hire hundreds of researchers in nanotechnology and environmental, materials and computer science in the next 10 years. The city, seeking economic benefits and a new talent pool, will donate property and funds. Some 27 universities worldwide have expressed an interest; the city will issue a formal request for proposals by September. Offers can come from single universities or teams, and potential for economic development is the main selection criterion. Mayor Michael Bloomberg says a winner will be chosen by the end of 2011.



“There wasn’t a blog devoted to the science of animal cognition. I saw a hole I thought I could fill.”

Jason Goldman