

Is blogging journalism and other questions



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Six years back, when I made the switch from reporting science for the mainstream media (newspapers, magazines, news agencies) to an on-line medium, I was inundated with questions from well-meaning peers. Must I renounce the glamour of the printed world to embrace the vastness and click-or-miss anonymity of the cyber world? Does not a story read in black and white with the morning cuppa have a more lasting impact than one read on an android phone or tablet on the go? Concerned colleagues advised helpfully: on-line is the future, yes, but the romance of print will never fade. And one science journalist of repute gave me a clear disapproval: 'You are going to blog too? That's not journalism!'

Having swum in on-line waters and having passionately peeped into the crevices, I am happy to report I have survived. And blogged my head-off too. Which is one of the points of this note – what has the journey been like, is blogging journalism after all, should scientists blog and where this enormous information explosion in science communication headed for?

Before I get into these mind-boggling details, I have to admit: If there were no science bloggers, science would not be as glamorous and widespread as it has become in the last few years. Hats off to this informed, funny, adorable and quirky brood which has made life on the internet worth living.

Why blog?

The evidence is clear: science sections in Indian newspapers (and globally) are

shrinking. Television wakes up to science only during a nuclear disaster, a satellite lift-off or a Higgs boson. There are very few widely read science magazines simply because they do not make great commerce. Science coverage in mainstream Indian media, like many other issues of merit, has traditionally been minimal¹⁻³, primarily because of advertorial pressures and the space crunch.

The obvious SOS route: go on-line. Report, comment, give opinion, analyse or put all that together and just blog. The number of journalists using a blog to replace or supplement their print avatars has grown phenomenally. They might choose to be objective, sticking to the traditional mandate of journalism, or to be opinionated trying to justify a point of view.

However, an eye-catching trend is that of scientists blogging on science and scientific issues. The growth in this tribe of on-line busybees is instantly apparent at international conferences on science communication where journalist bloggers are a minority!

The reason more and more scientists are debuting in the blogosphere is apparent – it gives them and their research a lot more exposure, helps them find grants or new collaborators and enhances career opportunities. It is also an intimate social-networking tool where feedback is instant, candid and ever-flowing. A newspaper story is like a movie that you might adore or abhor, but the maker might not know how you felt about it instantly. A blog piece is like live theatre, where the adulation or booing by the audience is instant. Also, a blog is an on-line resource that continues to receive comments years after it is posted. By contrast, comments on on-line news stories taper out within a couple of days.

Is blogging journalism?

Blogging, however, cannot and must not replace reporting on science issues. A blog is a personal viewpoint, very often informal and not bound by the classic writing structure that journalism school teaches us. It could be as free-flowing or structured as its author chooses it to be.

The best science blogs, however, retain the classical structure – answering all questions the reader might have,

explaining the scientific concept in layman's language while adopting a conversational approach and looking at the implication of the research/study at hand. They exceed the remit of a news piece by becoming invaluable on-line resources, pooling in supplementary data on the topic by way of hyperlinks, pictures, diagrams and references. Most times, space constraint and format do not allow everything to be tucked into a news article. A blog is an ideal place to accommodate such interesting asides.

In that sense, blogging is not strictly journalism but supplements serious and consistent reportage.

The challenges of blogging

For full-time reporters and editors, who chase news as a day job, retaining the quality and freshness of blogs is a challenge. It is one more job to do, apart from hunting down news, pegging it to the editors, cultivating sources, researching, on-line and off-line social networking and most importantly, writing/broadcasting/editing. Writing a meaningful science blog consistently demands as much time and energy as any of these tasks.

A periodic blog – say daily or weekly – also needs ample planning to remain useful and interesting. Many blogs, science or otherwise, begin with a bang posting daily content, petering down to weeklies and suddenly writing their own epitaph one fine day. The primary reasons: lack of interest, incentive, time or topics to write on.

For scientist bloggers, the thin ethical line to tread on is whether a blog or tweet on their own work takes the shape of blatant self-promotion or not. Many scientists I know blog anonymously just to avoid getting into trouble. The issue has been debated at many workshops and conferences globally and my contention is that there is nothing unethical to talk about one's own work as long as the scientist is adhering to embargo or legal guidelines set out for his/her research by a laboratory or a journal. After all, scientists are human beings and would love their work to be appreciated, commented and debated about!

Indians are vocal and opinionated or, as Amartya Sen would have us believe,

'argumentative'. So as soon as a blog piece is up in India, you can expect comments of various hues – some objective and rational, some angry, some offensive and some totally off the mark. Many blog pieces run the risk of being sabotaged into parallel discussions on absolutely unrelated issues. It is frustrating for a blog owner to press the 'moderate' button more often than the 'approve comment' button.

Another nightmare for serious bloggers is spam. 'Fake passports and driving licenses', 'excellent quality branded shoes' and 'cheapest honeymoon packages'. Spammers are relentless. You might block them regularly, but there is a spammer lurking somewhere around to pop right in. A good spam-blocker is as

much a pre-requisite to start blogging as an anti-virus used to be when we all started using laptop computers about a decade back.

Science blogging in India

Science bloggers in India are a nascent tribe. Recently, a list compiling science bloggers from India on Twitter found a handful of serious ones, mostly scientists, some journalists, mostly outside India and just a few in the country⁴.

Since the space is by and large unexplored, the scope is enormous. Anyone with good science-blogging skills has a chance of standing up and getting noticed.

1. Dutt, B. *et al.*, Science and Technology 2008, p. 119; <http://www.nistads.res.in/indiasnt2008/india-S&T-2008-Full.pdf>
2. *Public Understand. Sci.*, 2000, **9**, 123–140; doi: 10.1088/0963-6625/9/2/303.
3. Salwi, D. M., *Science in Indian Media: A Blueprint for the New Millennium*, Vigyan Prasar, New Delhi, 2002, p. 174.
4. Twitter list of Indian science bloggers; <https://twitter.com/NeuroWhoa/india-science>

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Science reporting in Hindi



Sopian Joshi

'Have you studied science? No? Not even a B Sc?' Not an uncommon eventuality for a reporter who needs a scientist's help. It is followed by a look of disapproval on the scientist's face, telling the reporter the discussion is not going to last too long or provide the answers he needs.

A lot of scientists do not like to discuss science with non-scientists, which is not at all surprising. The world of science is built around peer review and empirical experimentation. Journalists and storytellers are external to it. Besides, some well-known science reporters have an education in science and a great familiarity with that world. That is how the latest developments get reported in the media.

The real tragedy in Indian journalism, though, is the absence of science in reporting the non-scientific world. For example, sports reporters seldom talk about aerodynamics of a swinging cricket ball, or the swerve of a football after a free kick. Reports on drought seldom move the focus away from the human tragedy to the hydrology of the region. Travel writing does not bring us up to speed on the geology of a tourism hotspot that makes it unique.

Which is a shame, because science can help us better understand everything; throw sharp beams of light in the dark corners of our imagination. The Indian media, though, has relegated science to the weekly science supplement, or to the reporting of the latest technological innovations. The tyranny of technology is rampant, because it places the world of innovation in the everyday world. Even if it is not the immediate world of the reader, it is often a world the reader aspires to, and hence, can imagine it.

Technology is sexy, its impact immediate. A better gadget, a new health treatment, an environment-friendly car, a robot that can cook. The products of technology – no matter how outlandish – are guaranteed human interest. In a media environment heavily tilted in favour of circulation numbers and TRP statis-

tics, technology is a low-hanging fruit that is accessed regularly.

Science, in contrast, is abstract. It is knowledge that has no immediate use to the reader. The annual summer rush to vacation in the Himalaya has nothing to do with plate tectonics. The Indian plate colliding with the Asian plate to create the world's tallest mountains, sending the ocean floor 3 km up in the sky to form the highest plateau called Tibet, may all seem very dramatic. But it does not create the packaged happiness that consumers need in their summer vacations.

Advertisers know this better than anybody else. They do not advertise in publications that do not make the story immediate to the readers (more accurate to call them consumers). With a glut of publications and TV news channels, there is severe competition of the limited advertising budgets in the corporate world. Science is a casualty in this race to the bottom.

The Hindi media is the leader in this race. There is virtually no writing on science in Hindi publications, or programming in Hindi TV news channels. Science gets eliminated by design. There is a great emphasis on short write-ups and programmes. But to make the abstract knowledge of science relevant to the readers requires explanation. The material typically does not have ready refer-