Communicating Controversial Science

The Blog Project

Grading: Pass/Fail
Start Date: 9 August

You must participate in this project, designing your own blog that ‘trails’ (or leads!) a controversy of your choice. You must update your blog 3 times/week for 10 weeks for a total of 30 entries. Some will be short (100 words), some longer (500 words) depending on the topic and your energy. Your blog will allow you to do some preliminary thinking and analysis towards the essay and presentation at the end of the semester where you describe the controversy you followed as a case study in science communication. So, some blog entries may contribute directly to your essay or presentation.

In the early days of this blog, you may just want to orient yourself and the reader to your controversy and what is interesting about it. Then, we would like you to comment on some of the following issues:

1. What is ‘stoking’ this controversy? How was it initiated? How might it be closed?
2. What are the ‘internal’ elements of the controversy and the ‘external’ elements? How does one contribute to the other?
3. What features of scientific ‘practice’ contribute to the controversy? For example...In The Golem, Collins and Pinch describe the “golden hands” problem where researchers have difficulty replicating an experiment. Yet, there is a plausible argument that some groups are better experimentalists than others. So, when would an experimenter know if the problem is with the experiment, the results, or with the person (the hands) conducting the experiment? You might also consider experimenter’s regress and some other features introduced in The Golem and other readings.
4. What communication problems are involved in your controversy? Is this an example of a ‘risk communication vacuum’ (as introduced in Mad Cows and Mother’s Milk) or a case of audiences acting with the precautionary principle in mind? Are probabilities being cited in ways that heighten uncertainty?
5. How are personalities contributing to the controversy? Your seminar discussions on the role of expertise will help here.

In addition to the ‘issues’ that will form the content of the blog, we would like you to think about some ‘formal’ components of what makes a ‘good blog’. Have a look around at the

http://newmediaforscience-research.wikispaces.com/
science blogs. Some for starters can be found at [http://scienceblogs.com/](http://scienceblogs.com/) You may especially want to look at Pharyngula by P.Z. Myers which is influential. Closer to home (or at least UQ!) is Professor John Quiggin’s well-followed blog [http://johnquiggin.com/](http://johnquiggin.com/) (he’s on hiatus until September, but it is well catalogued). Also see [http://techcrunch.com/](http://techcrunch.com/) Another well-followed Queenslander, John Cook, blogs and moderates [http://www.skepticalscience.com/](http://www.skepticalscience.com/) You’ll also find that all of the major scientific organizations and mainstream news outlets have blogs. You might want to look at “Dot Earth” at the New York Times or Earth Watch ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/richardblack/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/richardblack/)) at the BBC. Also ABC science has several blogs associated with it.

We ask you to adopt a strategy for these **formal blog features**:

1. Investigate and adopt a strategy of referencing and citation for your blog. How would you differentiate between peer-reviewed scientific literature and other bloggers views, for example (the hyperlinks will look the same!)? How do you signal quality to readers?
2. Ruminate and adopt a strategy for putting yourself in the blog. Blogs are much more personal than other forms of journalism (in most cases). Of the popular (well cited and visited) science blogs, how do they manage to be interesting and engaging and weigh in on controversial matters?
3. How do you make your blog attractive and inviting as well as compelling reading?

**Criteria**

This blog project is marked pass/fail. The criteria for passing are:

1. 30 entries evening spaced over 10 weeks, beginning **9 August** or before.
2. Setting up a blog and alerting the instructor to its URL on **9 August**. We recommend Wordpress or Postrous for your sites. You can also use the blackboard site for the course (you will see the blog feature enabled). Be warned that the blackboard site may frustrate your attempts with the formal blog features.
3. Introduction and Analysis of the controversy of your choice along the issues of 1-5 above.
4. Adopting strategies for the formal blog features above.

If you become famous from your blog, this will also be taken into account.

**Steps for Success:**

1. Have a look at other science blogs and do some analysis of what works and what you would like to do.
2. Choose a controversy that you would like to know more about. Perhaps this is an area where you would like to do science communication work. Remember, this blog could be an excellent addition to your portfolio of work. This is an opportunity for you to do something practical as well as analyse the communication in a scientific controversy.
3. Check out Postrous, Blogger and Wordpress to see which suits your ideas for your blog and take out an account. Let the instructor know your URL.
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4. Blog regularly, keeping an eye on the issues and formal features you will need to address.
5. Use your blog to prepare for your presentation and essay.