



Bloggging and social media bring public voice to policy issues

Panel: Science Blogging: The Next Generation

Organized by Science Borealis

CSPC 2015: November 27, 2015

Panelists: **Brian Owens**, General Science Editor, Research Canada / Science Borealis; **Amelia Buchanan**, Blogger, Journalism Student, Algonquin College; **Christopher Buddle**, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, McGill University; **Sabrina Doyle**, New Media Editor, Canadian Geographic; **Paul Dufour**, Principal / Adjunct professor, PaulyWorks / University of Ottawa; **Lisa Willemse**, Senior Communications Advisor, Ontario Institute for Regenerative Medicine

Takeaways and recommendations

- ✓ Trust and transparency are paramount
- ✓ Reference sources on blog postings
- ✓ Consider having an editorial team review postings
- ✓ Introduce academic incentives to reward scientists for outreach activities
- ✓ Support hubs like Science Borealis that draw scientists, media, public and policymakers

The policy issue: The media landscape is changing, leaving a gap in professional science reporting and writing. With the speed of scientific innovation increasing in many fields, more effective ways are needed to attract the public's interest and attention.

A growing population of science bloggers is helping to fill this void. More scientists are also turning to new media platforms as a way to disseminate their research to the broader public and create communities of interest.

For policymakers, these online communities provide a new window to engage the public and gauge the public's reaction—in real-time—to various issues. But the value of this interface depends on the trustworthiness of the science being communicated, as well as the audience or community being engaged.

At issue is how this platform can be used effectively to engage the public, scientists, policy analysts and government in meaningful policy debates.

The options: The Canadian public is interested in the work of our researchers, said Buddle. "I have direct experience in knowing that because of the effects of a blog and a tweet and whether a journalist picks that up."

A recent media analysis conducted by Dufour revealed that the words 'science' and 'muzzling' began appearing together in local and international media in 2013 largely because of the work of bloggers and social media organizations (e.g. Unmuzzledscience and Evidence for Democracy).

"I was intrigued by the incredible rise of advocacy groups using social media to trigger a debate in this country around a very important issue," said Dufour. "The power of that has led to what we have seen yesterday," he added, referring to Science Minister Kirsty Duncan's CSPC speech that the new Liberal government will value and respect science and scientists and rely on evidence-based decision making.

Blogging and social media are among the easiest ways to do outreach today, Buddle said. He noted that scientists who lift the curtain on how research works help to "humanize the process of science."

If scientists are going to participate in science policy, Buddle said "they have to move from behind pay walls and ivory towers and talk to people about their work." We cannot rely on media offices to do all the work as "they have their own agendas and priorities."

The audience generally agreed that social media and online communities are useful for gauging public attitudes to science and science-based issues. But as one delegate cautioned, "anecdotes don't make policy."

Building trust with the public is important and this starts with transparency. Since Single-author blogs are often unedited, Willemse said "the onus is then on the reader to assess the veracity of that blog, so you want to make sure that you ... present your facts in a way that people can actually understand where you're getting your research from."

Understanding your audience is also key. "If the whole point is to get more people to interact with you and pay attention to your words then make it easy for them," said Doyle. Avoid jargon, write clearly, think visually, and try to make it as interesting as you can, while staying within the bounds of facts, she said.

Delegates told the panel that it's important to provide information that can be reproduced so that someone who works with that data will end up with the same findings.

Buchanan, who runs a single author blog called *Lab Bench to Park Bench*, said she references all sources in each post. As an unedited blog, she said she knows the importance of being open with the public.

Buchanan is also affiliated with *Science Borealis*, a science blogging hub launched at CSPC 2013. It is a growing community that connects science bloggers to the public, policymakers and media. Her submissions are reviewed by an editorial team, which helps validate her work.

But Buchanan's science education did not prepare her for the world of communication. "As someone who is trained as a scientist, we're not given any communication education whatsoever," said Buchanan, who decided to top-up her biology degree with a journalism degree.

Buddle agreed that there are few incentives for academic scientists to do outreach. "Without support for these activities, only small number of academics will take any time to think about science blogging...and to link their work to science policy."

If we solve this issue around incentivizing outreach, Buddle said, "I think the landscape of Canadian science policy will shift rapidly and in many positive and productive ways."

References:

Science Borealis; <http://scienceborealis.ca>

Unmuzzledscience blog; <https://unmuzzledscience.wordpress.com/>

Evidence for Democracy blog; <https://evidencefordemoc>