

Welcome to 'blogademia'

Daniel Jolley, Fleur-Michelle Coiffait, and Emma L. Davies on purpose, positives and pitfalls

The British Psychological Society's Public Engagement and Media Award in 2015 went to Mindhacks, a blog led by psychologists Dr Vaughan Bell and Dr Tom Stafford that has featured over 5000 posts across the past decade. Example posts include descriptions of visual illusions, a self-test for synaesthesia, and tips on the best way to win an argument. Accepting the award at the Society's Annual Conference, the pair urged: 'Each one of you has probably got those 5000 posts inside you. Make use of the resources on the internet, but put your own thoughts online too.' We share their passion for 'blogademia' (a term coined by Saper, 2006), and here we aim to reflect on its purpose, positives and pitfalls, moving on to some general tips and guidance on blogging specifically for psychologists.

Benefits of blogging

Setting up and curating a blog can be relatively easy with the aid of a variety of platforms, from WordPress and Blogger to Quora and Postach. A blog is a series of entries of information presented in reverse chronological order that are generally shared publicly, although it is possible to restrict readership. These can be posts either from an individual or from groups of individuals, and range from commentary on research to personal reflections. Some blogs combine a mixture of the two.

Writing a blog can offer the author various personal and professional benefits. The first is the ability to be able

use blogging as a way to 'make notes' and formulate ideas, whilst at the same time developing a writing habit and refining writing skills. Recording ideas in a blog post prompts you to write in a clear and accessible style, whilst also allowing you to return to these ideas at a later date. Blogs can be used to share and formulate ideas during development of projects, explore a new research area, or consider new methods or techniques.

The use of a blog as a means of self-

reflection is particularly useful when considering teaching courses such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PCTHE) where some tutors encourage participants to reflect on their teaching via blogs: for example, the 'blogfolio' web-based learning portfolio approach reported by Tang Lin et al. (2007), where a blog platform extends the key functions of the learning portfolio to collect, select, reflect, project and respect (Barrett, 2003), as well as promoting publicity, networking and collaborative learning.

Similarly, blogging can be a way to seek, share and exchange ideas. Most bloggers enable the comment function on their blogs, thus allowing readers to leave reactions, opinions and responses to the piece that can promote further discussion. This can open up dialogue between authors and readers and can facilitate a unique opportunity for the exchange of ideas made possible by online platforms.



Blogging can be a way to seek, share and exchange ideas

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These ideas could be new directions for research, or indeed just a new perspective on your research. Blogging is also ideal for building and maintaining networks with others in the field and developing a sense of community (Kirkup, 2010). Researchers or practitioners with shared interests can engage in further discussion via a blog that may promote future creative ideas for research and practice. Blogs also allow collaborations to develop and can enable projects that transcend traditional barriers, such as geographical distance, as well as offering asynchronous discussion regardless of time zones or incompatible diaries. Community members may have previously met at a conference or other event, or the contact may solely be due to the blog itself.

For readers, blogs offer an ideal medium for digesting psychological research in both your own and other areas. We all know that academic papers – whilst clearly informative and mostly interesting – can sometimes be long and onerous to read and take in. A blog post is a perfect source to provide a summary (see, for example, the Society's own Research Digest blog at www.bps.org.uk/digest, or the first author's www.conspiracypsychology.com). You may also be able to access summaries of research via blogs based on full articles that are behind a paywall. Gregg (2006) proposes that this type of blogging can be seen as 'conversational scholarship', enabling academics to write in a less formal style and open up psychological research and practice to a much wider audience.

Blogging is also an effective way of increasing your professional profile, whatever career stage you are at. For example, blogs can showcase areas of expertise and involvement for those seeking to improve their career prospects as – rightly or wrongly – employers increasingly use information available online about applicants in a process known as 'cybervetting' (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). Blogs can give the employer a clear indication of your

Meet the authors



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research, practice or professional expertise that goes beyond a standard employer website entry – that is, of course, if your blog is about your research and not personal reflections on looking after your cats. We touch upon the issue of purpose later in this piece.

No available research to date has explored the impact of blogs, which is especially important when our ability to demonstrate the impact of our activity receives heightened emphasis, in research, teaching, academia and professional practice. It is unclear what the public – or indeed, employers – think of blogging and whether it does have 'impact'. It can nonetheless help get your name and area of expertise or interest out there. For example, if your area of work is googled and your name appears near the top of the search results, this is the perfect demonstration of your active participation in the field.

Once you have developed your blog, this can lead to other opportunities, such as being asked to be a guest contributor on a larger blog, or even being commissioned to write pieces. Whilst this may seem a long way off for those yet to try blogging, this is a real possibility if you start today. The exposure to such wide and varied audiences offered by a

blog is unique and may be a stepping-stone to bigger things.

Purpose to blogging

As a blog author (or one of a team of curators), you are in control of the blog's direction and focus. This is therefore something that you need to decide when the blog is first formed – it may of course affect the name of the blog and how it is presented and publicised.

Reasons for blogging have been summarised under five key functions: identity; sharing; social interaction and community; benefit and need; and society and social order (Matikainen, 2015). More specific reasons include the sharing of personal revelations, selective disclosure, using blogging as an emotional or creative outlet, social networking, and advertising (Fullwood et al., 2014). For those studying, teaching or practising psychology, blogs can be an outlet for research-related content, reflections on your personal or academic life (e.g. a PhD journey) or a combination of several different functions. It is easy to find popular examples of each of these different types of blogs. What they have in common is that they are an outlet for the author to share and write about their own

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Tang Lin, H., Kuo, T.-H. & Yuan, S.-M. (2007).

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interests and invite comments, opinions and endorsements from others.

Blog audiences vary depending on the purpose of the blog. If, for example, you are blogging about a specific area of research (such as Babel's Dawn, which explores the origins of language), it is unlikely to receive a wide general and diverse readership. If you are blogging about psychology more generally (such as the Research Digest), you are naturally going to engage a more diverse range of people. With that said, however, Mewburn and Thomson (2013) analysed the content of 100 academic blogs and found that most appeared to be written with other higher-education staff in mind.

Blogging enables academics to critique the state of academia or practice more generally, and offer some of their own more personal thoughts on the issues. A specific example is where blogs allow critique of published papers. These discussions were formerly housed within letters to the journal that published the paper. Today, these discussions occur in the online world, via blogs and 'micro blogging' sites such as Twitter. Some academics are uneasy with this as they feel these discussions should remain in peer-reviewed outlets – however, these types of discussions are already happening online and are



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increasing. We may move towards a time where the expectation is that following publication, informal discussion on the paper will occur. This would work well with open-access publication. Engaging online in this manner also makes it possible for such discussions to occur in

a more much effective way, with an almost 'live' and interactive conversation occurring on a blog post (see Shema et al., 2012, for an example).

Blogging can also highlight – or 'whistleblow', unethical practices in the discipline. Professor Dorothy Bishop recently discussed the issue of 'editors behaving badly' in her blog (<http://deevybee.blogspot.co.uk>). Bishop reported on her blog an analysis of publications in a group of journals, which then drew attention to and opened up an important debate regarding the editors' malpractices at this journal. These examples clearly highlight the varying purposes of a blog and the value it can offer the author, as well as wider academic and practising communities.

What are the pitfalls?

Alongside the benefits, there are some pitfalls that should be considered. The first is the time commitment that is required. In our own recent survey of UK psychologists' blogging practices (Davies et al., 2016) respondents cited concerns about the time commitment required for maintaining a blog as one of the main reasons for not blogging. The amount of time it takes to create a blog post will vary person to person, and this skill can be refined over time. We suggest that you reserve a defined block of time for writing and proof-editing your post. Creating

First steps – tips on blogging

Purpose, audience and style go hand-in-hand. If you want your blog to engage a wide range of people, write in a general, accessible, engaging, easy-to-understand style, with a punchy title. Writing about something very specific (e.g. the psychological aspects of adolescent alcohol use) may only interest a particular subset of people, but if that is the focus of the blog from the outset, then you may be able to write in a more technical, in-depth style.

Generate sufficient regular content on your blog to attract people to return for future visits. It is easier to lose readers than gain them, so be mindful of this. Be careful with any promises or expectations you set up, and be consistent (or at least clearly communicate the reasons behind any change in focus).

Get the balance right between provision of information and not overwhelming and losing the attention of your reader. The best blogs tend to be the ones that are short (we suggest around 500 words).

Creating blog content does not need to be a solo activity. There are numerous examples of group blogs involving several authors providing different pieces and perspectives on the same topic. There are also opportunities on larger blogs (e.g. the Mental Elf blog) to be a 'guest blogger'. Working in a team not only distributes the pressure of creating content regularly, but also enables ideas to be discussed as a team before they are published. This can help with both the time commitment involved, and allow you to get feedback on your ideas before they are made public.

blog content can take time away from your other competing commitments and time that may otherwise have been spent writing for peer-reviewed publication or working as a practitioner. Employers may or may not be supportive of this, and you might have to restrict your blogging activity to your own time. However, blogging is a valuable teaching and learning tool that you can use both for your own benefit (e.g. to meet CPD requirements and remain up to date with the evidence base) and also the benefit of others (e.g. to share with students, supervisees and others). With that said, blogging is also an effective way of exercising your writing muscles, which is likely to be beneficial for writing other types of content in the long-run.

A further issue to consider is the potential negative reception you may receive from others in relation to your blog. When sharing content on a blog, by its very nature it becomes public and is exposed to the interpretation and opinion of others. If comments are enabled, there is always the possibility that some will be negative. This can be particularly pronounced if the post is on a topical or controversial subject, such as conspiracy theories. With this in mind, some authors blog anonymously, thus limiting the personal 'trolling' that they could receive. A caveat, however, is that whilst blogging anonymously, you may be identifiable from the content of your posts. This happened with the anonymous clinical psychology blog 'Confessions of a reserve list jockey'. The blog provided an 'insider' insight into the profession written by someone working in and aspiring to train in clinical psychology. The blog content was honest and sometimes controversial, and the author of the blog was eventually identified by senior work colleagues. It is perhaps telling that the blog no longer exists.

Reputational issues must also therefore be considered with regard to potential pitfalls. Be clear at the outset whether you are blogging 'self as self', 'self as employee' or 'self as practitioner', for example. Blogging 'self as employee' has recently been dealt with head-on by a major academic body, the International Studies Association (ISA), who have proposed banning editors from blogging. They suggested that banning blogging would mean that the journal maintained a professional tone. The ISA suggested

that confusion could arise from people misidentifying personal blogs as a reflection of editorial policies. Regardless of whether you agree with these sentiments or not, it is worthwhile checking your employer's policy on such activities. If you do decide to blog 'self as employee', it is very important that you are mindful of what you cannot say – whether blogging anonymously, or not.

Also, be aware that whilst you may clearly blog 'self as self', your comments can still be taken as though you are writing as 'self as employee'. The opening line of William Patry's 2008 blog stated clearly 'please don't attribute anything in the blog... to Google, which employs me', yet news stories mentioning his blog still opened with 'William Patry, Google's Senior Copyright Counsel said...'. On his final post before shutting down his blog, William said that there was nothing he could do to stop this implication, other than to stop blogging. Whilst a drastic solution, shutting down your blog

is one way to deal with any reputational risks. It is also worth reflecting on the purpose of your blog and discussing the issue with your employer, as well as deciding whether you could turn your posts into 'self as employee'. Seeking appropriate confidential arenas outside of your blog to discuss frustrations and sensitive issues is also important, such as peer supervision or a formal meeting with your employer through the appropriate channels.

A final consideration for practitioner psychologists is that you may not want service users to see a particular post due to the potential impact on the therapeutic relationship, so an anonymous blog may be more appropriate if blogging 'self as therapist'. With that said, blogging anonymously is not foolproof, and you must put things in place to protect yourself as much as you can. It is

After writing – more tips

Proofread – bad spelling and grammar give a bad impression and may lead readers to question your professionalism and credibility.

Tell people about your blog post, once you've written it and made it live. Use a social media account (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn); put your blog web address on your e-mail signature, business cards and CV; promote relevant blog posts at conferences. We have had success putting all of these suggestions into practice!

Publicise other people's blogs by linking to them in your own blog posts – other bloggers are likely to return the favour.

Make sure you 'tag' your content correctly – this involves assigning a category and keywords to your post, which allows search engines to pick up the post and display it in any searches for those terms and include it in its rankings.

Engage in discussion with those who comment on your blog; this can allow your network to flourish and further ideas to develop.

Be confident enough to deal with negative attention, if you attract it. Explain, apologise or engage with readers on the blog post...

...But don't 'feed the trolls': some people deliberately post inflammatory comments in order to provoke a response, and it is best to ignore or delete these.

important that anyone thinking of blogging remembers to maintain the confidentiality of other people who may be mentioned in blog posts, unless they have given their explicit permission for this information to be shared in a public forum.

Over to you

Blogs represent a popular and accessible medium, a dynamic, interactive online platform that allows authors to exchange ideas and to develop research networks and communities of practice. They are here to stay. Sure, blogging is not without pitfalls, such as time and potential negative feedback. You also need to be mindful of any reputational risks, and if you are blogging 'self as employee', know what you can and cannot say. We believe, however, that the benefits far outweigh the negatives. With this in mind, we urge you to explore blogging for yourself, and in the boxes on these pages we offer some practical tips to help you do just that. Dip your toe in by checking out the British Psychological Society's own Research Digest blog at www.bps.org.uk/digest, or if you already have a blog that you'd like to share with fellow psychologists, tweet @psychmag using the hashtag #psychbloggers.

"blogging... an effective way of exercising your writing muscles"