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Why I'm Staying Gone from ScienceBlogs

BY DAVID DOBBS 07.08.10 11:15 AM

I knew [when I left ScienceBlogs](#) that SB might well reverse and kill their ill-considered Food Frontiers. But I knew that would happen if and only if the reaction to that lame decision was so toxic and threatening to SB that they'd feel they had to kill Food Frontier. How would it get toxic? It would get toxic if they lost some top bloggers and suffered a horrific PR kickback throughout the blogosphere.

Some have questioned from the start whether [those who left or went on hiatus](#) were overreacting. To some, SB's reversal seems to have confirmed we got our panties in a wad over not much. Two answers to that:

1. The only reason SB has reversed is because several of their bloggers, including some heavy hitters like Skloot and Laelaps, got their panties sufficiently wadded to up and leave.
2. Sb's fail was as a big fail. The objections that it wasn't that bad miss the mark. Some have asked, well, why shouldn't Pepsi have voice in the conversation about science? But no one was saying Pepsi shouldn't have a voice. In case no one has noticed, Pepsi can put up a blog on its own, and it had; it already had a voice on the blogosphere, even aside from the zillions it is free to spend on advertising.

But having a voice and buying a place at a table where places are usually earned through credibility rather than cash — that's a different can of soda. I and others objected because when SB decided to take money to give Pepsi a blog alongside the nonsponsored blogs at SB, and almost virtually indistinguishable from them, it crossed all sorts of lines. And these lines are fundamental.

I alluded to some of those in my own exit post, but no one has summed it up more neatly than [MartinRobbins did in his post](#). Robbins hits it on the head: SB's Pepsi move created dyspepsia because it violated important principles and practices about identity, respect, and the crucial distinction between editorial and advertising.

Identity

<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2010/07/why-im-staying-gone-from-scienceblogs/>

Adapted by the Center for News Literacy; Stony Brook University 2013

The first point is really so simple that it's banal, and it's quite staggering that Adam Bly, Seed's CEO, doesn't seem to understand it. To its bloggers and readers, ScienceBlogs was always a meritocracy built by top science bloggers. They attracted the best science bloggers from the US and increasingly around the world, and allowed a community to organically develop in which everyone had a stake....

It should be immediately obvious that selling a seat at this table damages the brand, whoever it is. It's like watching King Arthur hand-pick eleven knights of the Round Table, and then sell the twelfth seat on Ebay. If anyone can buy themselves a Seed Blog, then one of the main reasons to blog there – the prestige – is gone. And the effect of that is doubled when King Arthur himself doesn't bother to tell the knights until some rich kid in Gucci armour wanders in the room asking where the bar is.

Respect

“The SEED management team has repeatedly failed to treat me and my fellow bloggers with courtesy and respect, and this latest event goes beyond disrespect into actively undermining our credibility.”

The above quote is [from Brian Switek](#), one of the top science writers on the web, and a jewel in Seed's crown until yesterday, when he quit.

The latest insult for Switek was that the bloggers who helped build the site weren't consulted on such a fundamental change in direction. I'm not privy to the internal world of ScienceBlogs, but when your best writers are [saying things like](#)...

“...the skanky clandestine manner in which it was executed is a fucking slap in the face from Adam Bly and the ScienceBlogs overlords, reflecting their overall (lack of) respect for our collective contributions and investments.”

...then, my friend, you have fucked up very badly. As [Abel puts it](#): “You reap what you sow.”

Advertorials

The following guidance comes from the American Society of Magazine Editors, and was highlighted [yesterday by Knight Science Journalism](#), who point out that this is an issue that traditional media have wrestled with for years. It's worth reading in full:

“For magazines to be trusted by consumers and to endure as brands, readers must be assured of their editorial integrity.”

“Editorial-looking sections or pages that are not produced by a magazines editors are not editorial content. They should be labeled Advertisement, Special Advertising Section or Promotion at the top of every page in type as prominent as the magazines normal body type...”

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“Advertisers should not pay to place their products in editorial pages nor should they demand placement in return for advertising.”

This is one of the fundamental rules in US magazine publishing, and one that a website indexed by Google News ought to take seriously (the comment by [a reader of Jack of Kent's blog](#) that “these are only blogs, not published content” is spectacularly naive). It's also one of the scummier practices we see in British newspapers – all those Daily Mail stories about products with telephone numbers and websites at the bottom.

I hope that's clear. These are not particularly fuzzy lines. And they are not trivial. They are fundamental. I may catch flak for this, but I think it significant that some of the earliest, most empathic, and sharpest actions and objections came from people with some grounding in journalism. As Robbins points out, journalism has long recognized that it's vital to have clear distinctions between advertising and editorial, and the entire point of the Pepsi blog was to blur those lines, and give a commercial message some of the dressings of editorial content. It let Pepsi buy a credibility that should be earned otherwise. In doing so, it threatened the credibility of the bloggers who established ScienceBlogs. In that sense it was a zero-sum game that created winners and losers: Pepsi bought the right to siphon credibility from SB's bloggers. That's what that giant slurping sound was.

Now SB has reversed itself, killing the Pepsi blog, and some are asking if [we can just move on now](#).

Please to give me a break. That SB would make such a mistake to start with signals, to me, so profound a disregard for both the bloggers and the principles of good journalism that I can't see returning there.

That said, I don't question the decisions of those who stay on; there's some day good people and bloggers that appear to be staying, and I've no problem with that. But I must say that, having not questioned for a moment the wisdom of those who are staying, I find find it irritating to have any of them question my decision to go.