

Experimental Biology Blogging: Self-promotion and 'self-promotion'

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I realize it's been a while since EB 2012 ended and I left the not-so-sunny San Diego (at least, it wasn't sunny at the time). Conferences are always great for the development of ideas. You get new ideas about your research, new directions to go in or troubleshooting things to try.

And at EB this year, I also got some ideas about communicating science. Or at least, I had some ideas thrown at me. They crystallized what I believe to be one of the major issues facing scientists who blog: needless self-promotion.



(Source)

When I "reveal" my blogging to people in science, I'm faced with several reactions. I will list the most common here, starting with the most frequent:

- 1) You don't...*shudder*...put your own work on the internet!?
- 2) You do this in your off time? Shouldn't you be writing papers then? I'm concerned about your motivation.
- 3) You must not be a very good scientist (usually that's on the internet, but once in a while it's said to my face).

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100) That's nice.

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1,001) OMG I READ YOUR BLOG!

While I distilled #1 to one ambiguous sentence, when you continue to converse, the real reason tends to emerge. Other scientists are concerned that I am attracting attention. They relax slightly when I make it clear that I never blog about my own work, but there is still a lot of discomfort. When it comes down to it, many (not all) other scientists DO NOT LIKE that I am making a voice and a "name" for myself on the internet.

Why? That sounds too much like self-promotion.

And as [Paug Berg, Nobel Laureate and Professor at Stanford](#) pointed out, self-promotion is antithetical to science.

While I understand this view, I (obviously) think it's a little outdated. It's made me think a lot, however, about the divide between scientists who are active on the internet and those who are not, and how those who are not active perceive scientists blogging, and why they think the way they do.

But first, the session.

There's a great storify of the Session from Angela Hopp. [You can read it here](#), I would embed it, but I warn you it's HUGE. There were a large number of scientists in the room, many of them tweeting, and we all had a lot to say. There's a great summary of the session from [Heather Doran here](#), but an even shorter summation would be this: one [scientist](#), one [radio correspondent](#), one [science communicator](#), and one [sciencey social media maven](#). They all agreed that communicating science to the public was a good thing (I should hope so!), and that scientists who CAN communicate well should be valued. Disagreements began to creep in, however, when it came down to HOW communicating scientists should...communicate.

While Cara Santa Maria and Megan Palmer both encouraged blogging for scientific communication, Paul Berg (who, by the way, [has done a heck of a lot recombinant DNA policy](#), and I by no means wish to diss his contribution. I think he's a brilliant man and I am very pleased that he is so positive toward science communication) was much more ambivalent, saying that in his view it was too close to self-promotion. At first, I had to laugh, because you're not going to tell me that someone got the Nobel Prize with ZERO self-promotion, just toiling away in their garage.

But of course, this is because academics have two different kinds of self-promotion. One is ok, and one is not. One takes place in the ivory tower, and one involves the dreaded public.

Self-promotion and "networking"

Academic self-promotion is good. Knowing and meeting the right people, staying in touch and making sure they remember who you are. Academic self-promotion is in fact

more than good, it's essential. The sad reality of biomedical science as I know it is that no one will fund your work if they don't have a clue who you are. By "you", I don't mean you personally (though that certainly helps), but who you have trained with, who THAT person trained with, who's in your department, and what you all have done. Grant people like to call this "evidence of past productivity", and "training environment", but what it really means is whether or not you've published, and who do you work with that they've heard of. There's a reason we refer to papers as "Smith et al, 2011", and not by their titles, because by referring to that person we are referring to their body of work, their history, and their expertise.

This means you have to do a lot of self-promotion within academia. We call this "networking", "presenting at conferences", "chatting up the seminar speaker at lunch", and in extreme cases "brown nosing". This is the "good" kind of self-promotion, the kind that we get a lot of lectures about.

Unfortunately, there's also the "bad" self-promotion. This is the kind that we are taught to loathe in academia. The kind that involves seeking out the press, trumping up your findings, and becoming Dr. Oz. We are taught from the beginnings of grad school and even before to mistrust people who do this. If your science is good...well you shouldn't HAVE to say anything. Build it and they will come. If you are trumpeting your science, [holding press conferences, giving TED talks, and posing for magazines](#)...scientists get very quick to mistrust your work. This is because behavior like this has a history, and it's not a good one. Too many times, scientists like this have shot to fame in the public eye, and been shot down just as quickly. Self-promotion outside the ivory tower smacks of ego. The ideal scientist is the one that is famous only among other scientists.

But what are we to do? Someone has to communicate to the public. And, as Paul Berg was quick to point out, there are bad journalists out there (though there are also loads of good ones, many of whom I admire) who will misquote you or misunderstand. Dr. Berg's final conclusion appears to be: don't reach out, don't get personal, just smile and be responsive when the journalists come to you.

But that is not not enough.

Think of self-promotion in academia. People don't come to you to collaborate unless they know you exist. You could make the prettiest viral vectors in existence, but if no one knows who you are, no one will use them. Science communication is similar. If journalists or bloggers don't know you exist, it's the rare one that's going to seek you out. And if they can't find you, your voice can't be heard. A lack of voices has plagued the communication of science for far too long.

We need experts willing to speak out. This may mean some people blog (and I encourage more scientists to do so!), but scientists can also use other methods, not all of which are overly time consuming or difficult:

- 1) Keeping a good, easy to find website that is up to date, easy to navigate, and states your expertise in plain language (plainer than the "lay summary" on your R01, if prospective undergrads can't understand it, it's not plain enough).
- 2) Being willing to talk to journalists when they contact you, as Dr. Berg recommends, and doing so in a timely manner (less than 24 hours, not the six weeks it takes for you to respond to emails from your grad student).
- 3) Encouraging trainees who are good at public communication (something which got universal support from the panel), not scolding them for bad priorities and self-promotion, but encouraging the development of responsible communication skills.
- 4) And it could mean seeking out news outlets when you KNOW they got something wrong, not just linking to it on Facebook with a "dislike!". Seeking them out, contacting them, and letting them know that you are an expert. Become the responsible source yourself, and as Cara Santa Maria emphasized, build relationships with good science correspondants.

None of these are shameless self-promotion. They can all be done responsibly and with care. And someone needs to do them. We have some wonderful science communicators out there, but we've got to give them something more than press releases to work with.

Finally, I'm interested to hear your ideas. What do you think of scientists who blog (though if you're reading this, I'm probably preaching to the choir)? How do you think scientists can help increase communication to the public? And what do you think of self-promotion outside the ivory tower?