



Blogging the history and philosophy of science

The Dispersal of Darwin (<http://thedispersalofdarwin.wordpress.com>) by Michael D. Barton, Portland, OR, USA

Michael D. Barton

Over the last 5 years, a new form of scholarship within the history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine has emerged. Historians of science and students of the history of science have turned to online tools for writing and communicating their work and interests, most notably blogs and Twitter. This review will summarize commentary about the utility of blogs in the profession and look at the variety of blogs focused on the history and philosophy of science.

In 2008, historian Benjamin Cohen wrote a piece for the newsletter of the History of Science Society in which he considered the motivations of those who expand their interests beyond the academic community through blogging.¹ He outlined what he called the 'Ayers–Onuf axis': those aligning with Ayers making historical information relevant by relating it to current issues ('the idealist'), and those with Onuf studying history for the love of history itself ('the realist'). For Cohen, bloggers are situated on this axis, 'either with the belief that they are generating and/or influencing public conversation or with the motivation to explore a given subject in depth'. Cohen, who blogs at *The World's Fair*,² finds a pedagogical value in his own blogging, his posts becoming supplemental material for courses and helpful in his own research ('a kind of electronic set of note cards'). History and philosophy of science bloggers also fit on this axis, but beyond informing readers of the blog of historian of biology John Lynch, he did not mention others beyond a few notable podcasts.³

While Cohen was probably the first to reflect on the history of science blogosphere, his article has prompted a number of responses. Will Thomas described his shared blog *Ether Wave Propaganda* as a 'laboratory of scholarship, an experiment to create a sustainable alternative culture to the one with which we are familiar'.⁴ Not only do blogs extend conversation beyond seminars, colloquiums, conferences, and journals, but they can do some things better. Specifically, for Thomas, articulating ideas, speculating about ideas (with quick response times compared to journals), the recovery and ability to revise information, and providing criticism. Thomas closed by stating that blogs are 'an opportunity to bring in traditions from outside scholarship to see what can be

done'. Historian of exploration Michael Robinson offers on his blog, *Time to Eat the Dogs*, that blogging has a personal dimension beyond public and professional communication.⁵ His blog works as a writing workshop and 'a way of unwinding the process, of venturing outward, testing the ground, roaming somewhere else, and testing it again.' Loïc Charles, while also believing that a blog 'permits freer exchanges than conference sessions and journals,' wrote on *History of Economics Playground* that blogging also benefits from ceasing the ephemeral nature of conversation.⁶ Discussions about a particular issue remain, and are available for others.

In 2009, I was asked to participate in a History of Science Society session about education and the Internet and discussed my own experience as a history of science blogger (since 2007 at *The Dispersal of Darwin*). Largely, I blog for the love of sharing content I find interesting and have as a result found blogging to help in networking with other writers and scholars in various disciplines. For my talk, I conducted a very informal survey of history and philosophy of science bloggers of which I was aware (of 40 or so blogs I listed, I contacted 32 and received responses from 21). I found that: bloggers included professors at varying levels (in history, philosophy, and physics), a research fellow, a post-doc historian, students at varying levels, an archivist, a curator, two antiquarian booksellers, an accountant, an entomologist, and several freelance writers and independent scholars; that most blogs are not history of science-specific, but rather include such content; motivations for starting the blog included research, communication, political commentary, networking, and creating an online reference; blogs may be categorised as pedagogical, departmental community, organizational community, outreach, business and hobby/self-interest/research; and that readers included historians of science, other professional academics, students and the public.

Asked 'What does blogging offer that cannot be expressed in other forms of writing?', the replies included rapid development of ideas; writing exercise, less formal approach to writing, publishing in a non-university domain; easy/quick public access and storage; close relationship with readers, and immediate feedback. Most importantly, blogging has brought to some writers positive benefits: publications, book reviews, conference invitations, radio appearances, networking opportunities, awards, prospects in job seeking, while some have had rather negative results (not all departments are keen on

Corresponding author: Barton, M.D. (darwinsbulldog@gmail.com)

Available online xxxxxx

¹ Benjamin Cohen, 'Why Blog the History of Science?' *Newsletter of the History of Science Society* 37:4 (October 2008) <http://www.hssonline.org/publications/Newsletter2008/NewsletterOct2008blog.html>.

² <http://scienceblogs.com/worldsfair/>.

³ Lynch blogs at *A Simple Prop* <http://blog.jmlynch.org/> and the collective *Whewell's Ghost* <http://whewellsghost.wordpress.com>.

⁴ Will Thomas, 'Blogging as Scholarship' *Ether Wave Propaganda* (October 24, 2008) <http://etherwave.wordpress.com/2008/10/24/blogging-as-scholarship/>.

⁵ Michael Robinson, 'A Blog of One's Own' *Time to Eat the Dogs* (October 27, 2008) <http://timetoeatthedogs.com/2008/10/27/a-blog-of-ones-own/>.

⁶ Loïc Charles, 'Blogging for what? Blogging for whom?' *History of Economics Playground* (November 14, 2008) <http://historyofeconomics.wordpress.com/2008/11/14/blogging-for-what-blogging-for-whom/>.

faculty devoting time to online projects).⁷ Other reasons for blogging or reading blogs I have come across are the daily access to the history of science content it provides and attempts to combat 'textbook cardboard' (borrowing a phrase from the late Stephen Jay Gould), a motivation behind science writer Brian Switek's history-rich posts at *Laelaps* that tell a more nuanced and accurate story of paleontological history.⁸

In order to gain an appreciation for history of science blogging in one place and time, *The Giants' Shoulders* blog carnival is a round-up of such content, posted on a different host blog each month.⁹ The carnival was started in June 2008 as a way for science bloggers to share posts about classic science papers, but has grown into sharing all manner of history of science, technology and medicine posts.

More recently, on her blog *From the Hands of Quacks*, Jaipreet Virdi considered whether or not there is a history of science community on the blogosphere (she noted that there is on Twitter, and I will note that my list of history and philosophy of science blogs also includes links to the various people who tweet about the field). Short answer: yes. She also conducted an informal survey to learn about readership, sent out through blogs, Twitter, and various HPS listserves.¹⁰ Virdi found that a good portion of those who read HPS blogs are graduate students, while the next largest group are interested non-academics. Readers seem also to be interested in blogs for images and other online content that does not make it into traditional publications. It seems, then, that there is a growing community of HPS bloggers with varied motivations, goals, and networking, as well as readers who actively participate and share

content, all occurring outside the confines of classrooms and conferences.

That list of approximately 40 blogs I compiled in late 2009 has since grown tremendously to over 100, and I continually update it on my blog.¹¹ Here are some recommendations beyond those previously mentioned: *Archy* by John McKay, *Boffins and Cold Warriors* by Cold War defence research historian John Turner, *The Bubble Chamber*, a collective blog from the University of Toronto's Science Policy Working Group, two blogs from the Darwin Correspondence Project on gender and human nature, *Evolving Thoughts* by philosopher of biology John Wilkins, *False Vacuum* by graduate student Aaron Wright, *History of Geology* by geologist David Bressan, *History of Science Centre's Blog* from the Royal Society of London, *American Science* from the Forum for the History of Science in America, *Longitude Project Blog* from the team working on a joint National Maritime Museum/University of Cambridge research project, *PACHmörgåsbord* from the Philadelphia Area Center for History of Science, *The Pauling Blog* from the OSU Libraries Special Collections, *The Primate Diaries* from history of science PhD Eric Michael Johnson, *OU History of Science Collections* by curator Kerry Magruder, *Ptak Science Books* by bookseller John Ptak, *The Renaissance Mathematicus* (which recently won the History News Network's 2010 Cliopatria Award for best individual blog) from historian of science Thony Christie, *Scientia Curiosa* by historian Holly Tucker, *Skulls in the Stars* by physicist Greg Gbur, and *Whewell's Ghost*, a collective from several historians and philosophers of science, including Rebekah Higgitt. I encourage readers of *Endeavour* to peruse this list and visit, comment on, and share these blogs.

⁷ Michael D. Barton, 'History of Science Society 2009: Your Daily History of Science' *The Dispersal of Darwin* (November 25, 2010) <http://thedispersalofdarwin.wordpress.com/2009/11/25/history-of-science-society-2009-your-daily-history-of-science/>.

⁸ Brian Switek, *Laelaps* <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/laelaps/>.

⁹ *The Giant's Shoulders* <http://ontheshouldersofgiants.wordpress.com/>.

¹⁰ Jaipreet Virdi, 'Survey Says...' *From the Hands of Quacks* (September 17, 2010) <http://jaivirdi.wordpress.com/2010/09/17/survey-says/>; and Jai Virdi, 'Survey Results' *From the Hands of Quacks* (September 17, 2010) <http://jaivirdi.wordpress.com/survey/>. Virdi pulled her results together for a short article in the HSS Newsletter, also published at her blog: Jaipreet Virdi, 'in a Cyberspace Community: The Growth of HPS Blogging' *From the Hands of Quacks* (October 6, 2010) <http://jaivirdi.wordpress.com/2010/10/06/conversing-in-a-cyberspace-community-the-growth-of-hps-blogging/>.

¹¹ Michael Barton, 'An updated list of history of science blogs and Twitter' *The Dispersal of Darwin* (August 4, 2010) http://thedispersalofdarwin.wordpress.com/2010/08/04/hos_blogs/.