

## **Science Blogging**

### **MANUAL**



a PhD's blog from VU Social Sciences  
**VU University Amsterdam**

March, 2017

**PhD programme**

**Graduate School of Social Sciences**

**VU University Amsterdam**

## Science Blogging

PhD programme Graduate School of Social Sciences

VU University Amsterdam

**Period: flexible, throughout PhD employment**

**Credits: 1-6**

**Coordination: Camiel Beukeboom in collaboration with an assistant**

### Objectives

The VU-GSSS [Socializing Science](#) website, which was launched February 19 2014, provides an online platform for all PhD candidates within the VU Faculty of Social Sciences. On this Socializing Science website PhD candidates can post blogs about their own research, scientific research they read, hear about in colloquia, and reflect on other PhD relevant issues. The Socializing Science website aims to create a lively platform showcasing the work of FSW PhD candidates both within and outside the Faculty and to facilitate the valorization of scientific knowledge. Moreover, writing blogs gives PhD candidates the opportunity to publish, albeit in an informal manner, at an early point in their PhD trajectories, to build a reputation, and to practice writing by explaining scientific research to a broader audience.

### The website

The title of our blog was the result of a prize question among all FSS PhD candidates:

#### **[Socializing Science: a PhD's blog from VU Social Sciences](#)**

This title (submitted by Sothy Khieng) was chosen because it is both catchy and nicely covers the goals and content of the website: i.e., bringing social science to a broad audience, explaining science to society, and while doing so, building a lively scientific and public community. The website link is [www.SocializingScienceVU.com](http://www.SocializingScienceVU.com). The website design is by Robert Paauwe. We also have a [Twitter](#) account (@SocSciVU) and [Facebook](#) page.

### *Target audience*

By explaining both the process, practice and results of scientific research to a broader audience, we aim to reach a broad worldwide audience interested in Social Science research. The target audience may thus include laymen with a general interest in science, people working in practice interested in the practical relevance of science, and even people who don't like to read about science.<sup>1</sup> Other academics working in similar or different areas, and other PhD candidates and staff within VU-GSSS and the VU in general, are an obvious more nearby target group. A specifically relevant target group are your fellow PhD candidates working on PhD projects all over the world. As the experiences of these young academics are very comparable, your blogs about your research and general PhD issues, PhD careers, and tips and tricks are appreciated and shared by a large community of international peers. The website is visited by a still growing number of visitors from all over the world.

### *Website content*

On the website you will find:

- **Blog Entries:** On the home page is a stream of blog entries. These are posted in chronological order with the most recent first. They are categorized for topic (e.g., scientific area of FSS departments, PhD issues, Tips & Tricks), and tagged. Under each blog there is a possibility to add reactions. The website also lists the most popular blogs, and you will find a twitter stream from @SocSciVU. Social media share buttons allow for easy sharing.
- **Upcoming events:** Up-to-date schedule of VU-GSSS courses, PhD platform events, colloquia at FSS, elsewhere at VU and outside VU.
- **People section:** Profiles with picture of all PhD candidates connected to the various departments within FSS: photos, brief information, link to full profile on VU website, link to published blogs.

### **Organization**

The blog is edited by Camiel Beukeboom, an editorial board with PhD candidates from various departments, and an assistant – Nadia Bij de Vaate – who runs the daily management of the website and editorial process of the submitted blogs.

To submit a blog or blog posts idea, and for all questions and remarks email [SocializingScience.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:SocializingScience.fsw@vu.nl). Other postings for the website besides blogs are also very welcome (e.g., video's, funny comics, reading tips, announcements of upcoming events or brief notes about past event, agenda items, etc.). We strive to keep the website alive by posting new blogs regularly.

### *Editing process*

Before you start writing a blog post please have a look at the tips in the final sections of this manual. These tips will for instance help you to find a clear focus and text structure, which are crucial elements when writing a good blog. Please also check whether your text meets these criteria before you submit. If you have questions, or want to discuss a blog idea, don't hesitate to contact us; we may be able to help you.

When you submit a blog you will receive feedback and suggestions for improvement from the editorial board. The aim is to ensure that your post clearly and coherently exposes one argument or message by maintaining a focus throughout the piece, and uses a proper style, text structure and sentence formulations. Before publication we also ask you to submit visuals and a short bio that is posted under your blog.

### **How to earn EC's?**

VU-GSSS PhD candidates can earn credit points by blogging. The number of credits you earn is based on the number of blogs you publish during your PhD employment. The maximum amount of credits that can be obtained is 6; but any number of credits (1 or more) is possible. When a PhD candidate has published a required number of blogs to obtain credit's, or when employment ends, he or she submits an overview of contributions in a Word doc (with titles and links to published blogs) to the graduate school to apply for the credit points and a course certificate.

In order to determine the EC's awarded for one's blogging efforts we advance the standard that writing an average elaborate blog that requires some preparation, corresponds to 7 hours study load. This is determined as follows: One blog is approximately two pages long (500-1000

words). The general norm for writing assignments is 2 hours per page, which means that writing the blog itself equals 4 hours, plus 3 hours for the preparation for writing the blog (e.g., reading literature, attending colloquium etc). Given that one EC corresponds to 28 hours of work, writing 4 blogs corresponds to 1 credit; writing 8 blogs = 2 credits; 12 blogs = 3 credits; 16 blogs = 4 credits; 20 blogs = 5 credits; 24 blogs = 6 credits.

Every now and then someone may write a very short and easy blog (e.g., a very brief note) that requires no preparation, nor a lot of writing time. This is certainly welcomed, but these should not be counted for credits. You may, however, in your submitted overview argue that a number of short and easy blogs or postings should in combination count as one elaborate blog.

### **What to gain from science blogging?**

In addition to the traditional outlets for scientific research, scientific discourse nowadays increasingly occurs on fast online blogging sites hosted by individual researchers or groups. Also, many interactive scientific news sites post (opinion) stories and allow reactions.

Moreover, recent developments have shown an increasing emphasis on societal relevance and real world impact in the evaluation of scientific research. The value of valorization has been settled in official agreements like the 'San Francisco Declaration' and the 'Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021 (SEP)' agreed upon by important institutions like VSNU, KNAW and NWO. An important means for scientists to increase their societal impact and to valorize their work is by publishing about it on publicly accessible blog sites. Many scholars agree that this form of scientific communication has many advantages for academics. Below are a number of reasons that have been put forward to explain why blogging is both fun and useful for academics.<sup>2, 3, 4, 9</sup>

#### *1. Creating an online presence*

By delivering valuable and insightful content in your blogs you can show your expertise and gain reputation in your specific field. Media attention, networking- or career opportunities may be the result.<sup>3</sup> Creating such a public face is particularly important for graduate students, given their lack of established publishing records<sup>4</sup>.

#### *2. Publishing quickly*

In contrast to the traditional publication cycle in scientific journals that usually rewards you with a publication after approximately two years (or more) of hard labor, blogging is very fast. The style and brevity of a blog allow you to start producing mini-publications right now, which makes blogging a very satisfactory experience.

#### *3. Writing with more freedom*

In comparison to scientific publications, you have much more freedom in blogging. Not only in your choice of topics, but also in writing style which is less uptight, and not governed by strict regulations. There are no strict gatekeepers and you will not be criticized in lengthy reviews before being allowed to publish.

#### *4. Blogging fosters your own understanding*

In order to explain something complex to a broad audience you really first need to grasp what is most important to it. Blogging forces you to think about the real world relevance of scientific work,

and about ways to explain it in a comprehensive manner. As Einstein puts it: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough”. In the words of blogging PhD candidate Rebecca Hogue: “I like to get my ideas out there, and by sharing them (and writing them down) they become more solid.”<sup>3</sup> In short, blogging can be seen as a form of “learning by teaching”.

#### *5. Blogging enhances your writing skills*

Blogging is a good practice for your writing skills. Since a blog forces you to get to the point fast and to formulate the core of topic, you will learn to get rid of unnecessary detail and jargon. You will also learn how to effectively structure your text, how to formulate clearly, and how to tailor content for your audience.

#### *6. Reaching a larger and different audience*

The traditional scientific publishing models keep scientific work inaccessible to the public, despite the fact that much of the academic research is publicly funded<sup>2,4</sup>. Blogging - as a kind of open access publishing<sup>5</sup> - can help to partly overcome this problem. By means of blogs scientists can reach a readership for whom the research is relevant but normally have no access to it. Moreover, blogging allows scientists to explain the importance of their work, and to add a valuable scientific perspective to current public debates.

#### *7. Blogging is interactive*

Blogging provides you with rapid feedback from others, especially when your blog is disseminated on social networking sites. The socializing science website also allows readers to comment. This can be both satisfactory as well as instructive. Your “ideas can be challenged, extended or affirmed – in almost real time.”<sup>2</sup> The feedback may make you realize that you should rethink or reformulate things more clearly.

Moreover, this new interactivity in online scientific discourse has enabled researchers to publish thoughts and ideas that may be important but that are not fit for scientific journals. It also allows them to quickly vent their criticism on published work by other scientists. You can use your blogs to discuss or criticize articles or presentations. Recently, blogs have also been used to discuss questionable activities or fraud of researchers.<sup>6</sup> Blogging allows scientists to speak out quickly, and to discuss and combat misinformation. Blogs will also allow you to react quickly when others criticize your work.

#### *8. Valorization and external impact*

While obtaining publications and citations in traditional scientific journals remains obviously very important for scholars (i.e., H-index), there is more and more recognition of the importance of external impact. Research can be said to have external impact when an auditable influence is achieved upon a non-academic organization, e.g., your research is used by a business corporation, a government agency, a civil society organization or a professional media organization. In other words, we need to show that our academic efforts leave the scientific ivory tower. As noted above, the valorization of knowledge also becomes more and more important in the evaluation of universities and for grant proposals. Because blogging gives you the opportunity to communicate

your research beyond academic circles and reach a wider audience, it may help you to achieve external impact.

### *9. Blogging as a mean for networking*

The above points also highlight that blogging is a great means for networking. Your blogs can easily spread through social networks and you will consequently gain attention from a larger and different audience. That way, you can get in touch with other bloggers, other academics with similar interests who work in different areas, or people from the industry or government. A recent study on academic blogging showed that 73% of the analyzed blogs was directed towards other academics.<sup>5</sup> While this last point suggests that public outreach is thus less crucial for scientific blogging, it becomes clear that network possibilities with other academics are likely to happen.

### **Important notes when you start blogging**

Blogging helps you to establish an online presence (see 1 above), and you obviously want to convey a positive image by means of your blogs. When your blogs fit with the general topic of your PhD project, you can create a coherent image and show your area of expertise. This will also save time since you will already be highly familiar with the topic, and blogging, in turn, helps you to make sense of your research. Of course you can also write about PhD issues or science in general (e.g., a PhD experience, tips and tricks). Blogging also allows you to show the practical relevance of your expertise and experience. Given that many PhD candidates end up working outside academia, this may be very useful someday. Your reputation will obviously also benefit when the content of your blogs is proper, correct, and well written (see concrete tips below). Whether you write for a blog, a magazine, an online newspaper or academic journal your 'presence' should always be professional and passionate.

When this is done well, blogging will help you gain a positive visibility. Especially when you combine blogging with your own Twitter, LinkedIn or Facebook account in which you share your blogs and tweet about similar topics. It also makes perfect sense to add your blogs to your publication list on your CV. Your online image may have a real impact when you apply for future jobs. Potential future employers may get to know you through your blogs even before you apply. And when they don't know your online presence yet they will when you apply, because a first thing they likely do is google you.

Some scholars manage to become well known experts in a given field just by continuously blogging about their work and build a repertoire of content. Will all this take tremendous amounts of my time? Not really. Andrea Doucet, professor of sociology at Brock University in Ontario, encapsulated this well: "I blog not in addition to what I do, but as part of what I do."<sup>1</sup>

### **What to blog about?**

PhD candidates are free to determine the content of their blogs as long as it is within a Social Science scope or about PhD relevant issues. PhD candidates are free to determine when to write blog post, and on what topic. It does however help if you inform us in time about your planned contributions (see above, organization).

Below is a non-exhaustive list of potential blog topics:

- Conference or workshop visits. When a visit was funded by the **VU GSSS graduate fund**, the graduate fund requires a report, and you will be asked to publish a blog. Note, however that it is

not obligatory to report about the specific conference visit in your blog. You may broaden your focus (e.g., how to present, what to gain from conferences) or blog about the topic you presented without mentioning the conference, or something else. You can mention that the Graduate school funded your visit in a footnote.

Examples include:

- <http://bit.ly/14uOCC6> "Visiting Conferences abroad: cherries on top of an academic cake or absolute necessity? By Demet Yazilitas
- Attended courses
- Attended colloquia within or outside the VU. It would be great if most or many colloquia by prominent researchers held within our own Faculty are covered in a blog on the website.
- Experiences as a PhD student (e.g., frustrations, emotional roller coasters, celebrations and great enjoyment). Examples include:  
<http://bit.ly/1C2aU9G> "Thank you for your kind permission to reprint." NOT by *Gijsbert van Iterson Scholten*
- Advise for PhD candidates (e.g., what to gain from visiting conferences, writing tips). Examples include:  
<http://bit.ly/1wTPOXH> "Is participating in academic conferences worth the time and money" by Anouk van Leeuwen  
<http://bit.ly/1yeX82U> "Three good reasons to write like a monk" by Annemiek van Os
- Tips and tricks for PhD candidates (e.g., how to make a poster, how to use powerpoint). Examples include:  
<http://bit.ly/1nw16PA> "How to make a successful (and attractive) research poster? Tips and tricks" by Tamara Bouwman.
- Summary of own (preliminary) study results
- Summary / description of own written articles  
<http://bit.ly/1vgcO2k> "Born into inequality: How neighbourhoods influence birth outcomes in the Netherlands" by Vera Schölmerich
- Report of PhD defense
- Summary of dissertation
- Reflections on actual topics (e.g. in the news, TV show, etc.) from a scientific perspective
- Contributions to societal debates  
<http://bit.ly/1IGxAOY> "Why the poor remain poor" by Vera Schölmerich
- Discussing scientific practice (e.g., pressure to publish, ethical issues, sloppy science, etc)
- Discussing the use of academic blogging
- Read Literature
- Methodological tools or methods
- Etc. etc.

### **Concrete tips for writing good blogs**

Compared to scientific articles, a blog gives you more writing freedom and your style can be much looser (i.e., informal and entertaining). However, just like an article a blog certainly also needs structure and a clear focus, and this will take some careful writing and a few rounds of revision.

We learned that writing a good blog boils down to the following general issues:

- 1) *Your blog must be interesting for your readers:* Irrespective of the topic, it is essential that you can clearly explain why your blog is interesting and relevant for the audience, and what the reader will gain from reading your post. Therefore, it is pertinent that you figure out what the message or learning is that you want to convey to your readers. This learning must be clear right from the start (i.e., the title and the first paragraph, see also 3 below). It helps if you make it personal; when your blog provides advice or tips you can reveal what you have gained yourself. Personal stories and experiences are also more appealing and make for an interesting read. You could also relate to everyday questions or current issues to make your work relevant and appealing for a wide readership.<sup>1</sup>

To give an example: When you write a report of a conference you could sum up the details of the venue, the speakers, and what you have done, but this hardly provides worthwhile information for your readers. It will be more interesting when you talk about what you have gained from visiting the conference (e.g., your personal “aha Erlebnis”, frustration, or learning), as your readers may then profit from your experience.

- 2) *Your blog should have a clear focus:* Note that when you think about the message or learning you want to convey in your blog (see 1), it is better to focus on one main coherent topic than to cover many topics in one blog. If you note that you find it hard to convey one clear message in your first paragraph (see 1) you might realize that you have material for two or even more blogs.
- 3) *The text must be well structured:* The blog text should have an opening paragraph, a main body (usually consisting of a number of separated paragraphs) and a concluding paragraph.
  - Opening paragraph: Upon reading the first few lines, or only the headline (which is usually also in the tweet about your blog), the reader should get a good idea of the blog's main focus and learning (see 1 and 2). It is important that this paragraph immediately catches the reader's attention and interest. When the reader knows what they will gain from reading the post, they will be lured to continue reading. Don't be afraid to use provoking ideas and titles to trigger people. You can for instance use an anecdote, a quote, a bold statement, pose an important (research) question, or refer to a current happening. Also explain its' importance and relevance, and announce what this blog will add to it. In this opening you thus raise a relevant question or issue, and suggest it will (at least partly) be answered in the remainder of the blog.
  - In the main body of the text you work out a number of subtopics in separate paragraphs that work towards resolving the issue raised in the opening paragraph. This may differ depending on your topic, but usually you follow an hourglass structure; start out broadly and only then specify to details of lesser importance. When you discuss research on a particular important research questions separate paragraphs usually cover prior research, method, results.
  - The concluding paragraph ideally refers back to your broad and catchy opening. Here you provide the resolution or answer to the issue or question raised in the title and



opening paragraph. If this is done well the reader will be left satisfied, as he/she has gained a learning that was promised at the start of the blog.

- 4) *The topic must be easy to understand.* Keeping in mind the goal of our blog to translate scientific research to a broad target audience, our blogs should have a popular scientific flavor. This means that potentially difficult information should be well explained, interesting, and easy and pleasant to read. Also avoid details or terms that are only understandable or relevant in your scientific subfield (no jargon), remember your diverse potential audience.
- 5) *The text should be easy to read:* Note that reading online content is structurally different from reading print content. Content on the Internet therefore has to be particularly easy to digest and easily scannable, otherwise you will quickly lose a reader. This is already facilitated by the above points, which help the reader to quickly understand the main points and organization of the content, and allowing them to scan for the information they need, while bypassing the rest (if they wish). The following textual aspects are also important:
  - Keep it concise. As a guideline, use between 500 and 1000 words for one blog. When you extensively violate this norm you run the risk of “TLDNR” responses (too long did not read).
  - Avoid large blocks of narrative text; make sure it’s “chunked out” (broken down into smaller paragraphs of text separated by a white line break, and/or subheadings). The first line of each new paragraph should reveal the paragraph’s content. You may also want to highlight buzzwords, important passages or quotes in your blog in bold.
  - Use brief sentences! When a sentence is much longer than approximately one line, break it up.
  - Make it personal: Use of the I-perspective, and/or address the audience directly (you)
  - Use active voice (I conducted research) rather than passive voice (research was conducted by me).
- 6) *Your blog must look good:* Your blog will be posted in the website’s format with your picture above the text. Under your blog a brief bio is posted. Powerful visuals that are relevant to the main topic are also important to make it appealing (e.g., photos, drawings, figures; check copy rights or use free stock photos), so please submit these with your blog. Also make sure to add references and links to other sources (other blogs or articles) in your blog. This does not only contribute to your credibility but will also help you in terms of search engine optimization, links are also typically reciprocated.

Learning to write good blogs is a matter of practice, but also of looking at good examples and advise by others <sup>7, 10, 11</sup>. Thus, make sure to follow new posts on Socializing Science.

Other important tips you may want to consider:

- Make sure to **share your blog** in your own social media account(s) (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate), post it on your website, and email it to potentially interested colleagues. All this will increase traffic to your blog, and to the Socializing Science website.

- Make sure to follow-up on the blogs you have published – **always reply to comments** and reactions posted with your blog and check whether and how it is shared (see 7). If you see spam reactions, please notify us.
- Get involved in the scientific blogosphere (most easy through Facebook or twitter) by reading blogs and posts about PhD issues and research in your field. You can gain a lot of information and stay up-to-date about your field and what others publish about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Shipman, Matt (November, 2013). Expand Your Audience by Sneaking Up On Science. Retrieved December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from [http://www.scilogs.com/communication\\_breakdown/expand-your-audience-2013/](http://www.scilogs.com/communication_breakdown/expand-your-audience-2013/)

<sup>2</sup> Rob le Pair (maart, 2012). Het nieuwe publiceren: communiceren over onderzoek Retrieved December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from <http://roblepair.nl/het-nieuwe-publiceren-communiceren-over-onderzoek/>

<sup>3</sup> Grant, B. (October 2012). *You aren't blogging yet?!?* Retrieved December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from <http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/29276/title/You-Arent-Blogging-Yet---/>

<sup>4</sup> Fullick, M. (October 21, 2011). *More than a storm in a teacup: The debate on academic blogging*. Retrieved December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/speculative-diction/more-than-a-storm-in-a-teacup-the-debate-on-academic-blogging/>

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, P., & Mewburn, I. (December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013). *Why do academics blog? It's not for public outreach, research shows*. Retrieved December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from [http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/dec/02/why-do-academics-blog-research?CMP=twt\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/dec/02/why-do-academics-blog-research?CMP=twt_gu)

<sup>6</sup> Lorch, M. (2013). *Accusations of fraud spur a revolution in scientific publishing*. Retrieved December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2013/nov/08/fraud-revolution-scientific-publishing-peer-review>

<sup>7</sup> Scheloske, M. (March, 2012). *Wege aus der Nische: Was man von erfolgreichen Wissenschaftsblogs lernen kann*. Retrieved December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from <http://www.wissenswerkstatt.net/2012/03/13/wege-aus-der-nische-was-man-von-erfolgreichen-wissenschaftsblogs-lernen-kann/>

<sup>8</sup> Terras, M. (April, 2012). *The verdict: is blogging or tweeting about research papers worth it?*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/04/19/blog-tweeting-papers-worth-it/>

<sup>9</sup> Munger, Dave (2013). *How to write a good research blog post*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://scienceofblogging.com/how-to-write-a-good-research-blog-post/>

<sup>10</sup> Lantsoght, Eva (June 2012). *Ten great blogs for PhD students*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://phdtalk.blogspot.nl/2012/06/ten-great-blogs-for-phd-students.html>