

Blogging

What is a blog?

Noun: A Web site on which an individual or group of users record opinions, information, etc. on a regular basis.

Verb: Add new material to or regularly update a blog.

It's fair to say that health blogs have taken a while to get going. Weblogs (blogs) have been around since the late 1990s, but they have only really taken off in health information circles in the last few years, as authors have understood how easy it is to write and maintain a blog and syndicate their work across social media. It's estimated that the blogosphere now exceeds 100 million blogs, the combined voice of which is an important source of public opinion.

In simple terms, a blog is a chronologically arranged list of web pages written around a theme. Many blogs are online diaries or journals, others cover specific subjects and many make use of tags to index the content in the blog as it grows.

Blogs are different from normal websites in a number of ways:

- They are generally the personal viewpoint of an individual or group of users
- They tend to be updated more frequently
- They often have a more informal tone
- They usually encourage debate with blog visitors via comments
- They are increasingly hooked up to social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, so individual blogs are automatically posted to these sites and discussion about the blog content can take place where millions of users are already meeting to debate.

Anyone can start a blog these days and it just takes a couple of minutes to make your site live ...

Some blogs worth checking out

Here's a selection of ten health and social care blogs if you are new to the topic and want to get a picture of how the medium is being used:

1. <http://www.badscience.net>
2. <http://scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org>
3. <http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog>
4. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/sarah-boseley-global-health>
5. <http://blogs.trusttheevidence.net>
6. <http://www.thementalelf.net>
7. <http://www.evidencebasedmommy.blogspot.com>
8. <http://frontierpsychiatrist.co.uk>
9. <http://www.ndti.org.uk/blog>
10. <http://www.gp-update.co.uk/Blog>

Micro-blogging

Micro-blogging is the term given to sites like Twitter that enable users to post real-time updates and join in online conversations in short posts ('tweets') that consist of 140 characters or less. In 2010, more than 145 million users sent on average 90 million 'tweets' per day¹.



1. Madway, G. (2010, September 14). Twitter remakes website, adds new features. Retrieved November 5, 2010, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1411135520100915>

Blogging

Why bother with blogs?

It has been widely reported that the rise of blogging and social media has taken the power away from those who work in marketing and public relations and democratised web-based communication. Brands are discussed online, with or without the involvement of the company behind them, so firms must choose whether or not they wish to participate in this conversation.

In the health sector, blogs and social media have given a voice to stigmatised and disenfranchised populations, such as people with severe mental health issues.

Despite this, many health organisations remain reticent to participate in blogging or social media and this is often fuelled by a lack of knowledge at senior management level. However, it seems only a matter of time before all health information providers get serious about social media or risk getting left behind².

Many health websites are static and simply wait for visitors to find them. Blogs, social media and other net-working tools enable you to push your information and brand messages out to your users, wherever they are spending their online time. You have more chance of reaching your audience on the websites they use most (e.g. Facebook) rather than waiting for them to find you.

What's more, search engines like Google rank well indexed recent blog content much higher than other web pages, so you have more chance of people finding your blogs than your boring old web pages.



Some senior managers are still railing against the social media revolution.

Where to start

So if you're ready to jump in and try out blogging for the first time, where do you start?

The good news is that most of the leading blogging tools are free and easy to use. There are lots to choose from, but they all do a similar thing:

1. Blogger – www.blogger.com

Google owns Blogger so you'll need a free Google account before you start. It's a simple case of giving your blog a name, selecting a design template and publishing your first post.

Here's a blog I set up in a couple of minutes: <http://pifblogging.blogspot.com>

2. Tumblr – www.tumblr.com

Tumblr is one of the newer blogging tools and it's especially popular with people who share lots of photos and videos. It's easy to post material directly from your smartphone (if you have one) and there are a wide range of design templates to choose from.

Here's a blog I set up in a couple of minutes: <http://pifblogging.tumblr.com>

3. Wordpress – www.wordpress.org

Wordpress has matured in recent years from one of the leading blog tools to a fully-fledged CMS (content management system). It's used by 15% of the top 1 million websites³ and many of the sites published from Wordpress are complex and content heavy affairs. A showcase of Wordpress sites is available at: <http://wordpress.org/showcase/>

You can sign up for a basic free version of Wordpress at: <https://en.wordpress.com/signup/>

More advanced users are likely to want to make use of the premium version, which can be downloaded for free and installed on a webserver or paid for via a monthly subscription.

2. Jan H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy, Bruno S. Silvestre. Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. Business Horizons (2011) 54, 241—251
3. <http://wordpress.org/news/2011/08/state-of-the-word/>

Blogging

Top tips for a successful blog

The advice for writing a blog is not so very different from writing other web pages. Here are a few things to bear in mind if you want your blog to be accessible and usable:

- Choose a topic that interests you and ideally has little competition from other blogs
- Make sure that the topic has enough substance to sustain regular blogs
- Choose a memorable and unique name for your blog and use artwork that will stand out from the crowd
- Write clearly and intelligibly using appropriate keywords (for search engines). Just because it's an informal medium, there's no excuse for poorly written blogs
- Structure your blogs to make them easy to scan (clear title and teaser, short sentences, paragraph headings, bulleted lists, appropriate images and quotes)
- Use tags to index your blogs (this will help search engines find your blogs and will also enable your readers to browse your archive)
- Ensure that you have permission to use images and other media on your site
- Encourage feedback from your readers and engage with people when they comment
- Keep it lively, engaging and fun.

Blogs and social media

One of the really powerful features of blogs is that you can easily plug them into your social media accounts and automatically post your blogs to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+ and whatever websites you use to communicate with your audience.

A handy tool to help with this is Twitterfeed: www.twitterfeed.com. It takes the RSS feed from your blog and sends it to your social media accounts every time you publish a new blog post.

What does the future hold?

The future for blogging looks bright with more and more health information sites recognising the potential of this medium. In recent months there has been a steady increase in the number of new blogs that feature the same kind of robust evidence-based methodology as many health websites. Sites like www.thementalelf.net provide regular updates of the latest reliable research, policy and guidance. It's a blog that makes extensive use of social media, but it also has high standards in terms of the quality of information on the site. These new hybrid sites will become more common as information providers become more technologically savvy and bring their content skills to the blogosphere.

About the author:

André Tomlin is Managing Director of Minervation Ltd (www.minervation.com) and has been working as an Information Scientist in the NHS since the mid-90s. He has led the development of dozens of major health websites and is a committed blogger and proponent of using evidence-based healthcare information to improve patient care.