

Talk About Biology—Online

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Talk about Biology—Online

Neuroscience researchers in the United States and Germany share a lack of enthusiasm for using social media and blogs to learn “information about scientific issues,” according to the study reported by Joachim Allgaier and his colleagues on p. 284 of this issue. By a large margin, it appears that they prefer traditional media such as newspapers and radio to keep up to date. Yet, although few of those who responded to an online questionnaire used blogs and social media accounts themselves, a larger proportion nonetheless saw those sources as having a significant influence on public opinion and on political decisionmaking. In the United States, a majority of responding neuroscience researchers thought that blogs were significant in both arenas and that social networks significantly influenced public opinion. German researchers were somewhat more guarded in their assessments of the influence of new media, but as with US researchers, more of the German researchers thought that the new media had significant influence than were willing to make use of such media themselves.

A caveat is needed right away. Only about one in four researchers polled responded, after several solicitations, so there is plenty of room for selection bias to be skewing the results: Those who did not respond might have a lower opinion of or might be making more use of new media than those who did respond. But this seems unlikely, given that the solicitation was made through an e-mail message directing those interested to an online questionnaire. And the difference between estimation of influence and personal use of new media among the responders has to be explained in any case.

There is no particular reason to think that neuroscientists are exceptional among biologists in their opinions and use of social media and blogs. It seems likely that a similar pattern holds in other fields of biology and perhaps in science more broadly (although new data to confirm that would be welcome). And if someone is not using blogs and social media, he or she is probably not contributing to them either. Can biologists' disinclination to use such media, if that is what it is, be a good thing? Why so shy?

Our guess is that many researchers would say that they simply do not have the time to be active in informal online forums, given the importance of publishing peer-reviewed articles for professional advancement. And there are some venues where considered, fact-based opinions are likely to be drowned out by trolls. Yet, for all that, biologists would benefit their profession and their personal influence if they made the effort at least some of the time and selectively, rather than ceding the ground to blatantly antiscientific forces.

It is in this spirit that AIBS has launched a forum in which members can comment on selected articles published in *BioScience*, including that of Allgaier and colleagues, reachable by going to www.access.aibs.org. Moreover, AIBS has a Facebook page, and various members of staff tweet at [@AIBSbiology](http://www.twitter.com), [@AIBS_Policy](http://www.twitter.com), [@tbeardsley](http://www.twitter.com). We hope that others interested in seeing biology contribute to informed decisionmaking will join in the online conversations.

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