

Health care blogs: finding, creating, examples

Blogs are one of the new Web 2 tools that allow people to contribute to the Internet either by creating their own web pages or by commenting on other people's, without needing access to sophisticated software and technology. Typical features of a blog (or web log) include regular updating, chronological presentation of entries, an archive of older material, the facility for adding comment and a list of links to other websites (blogroll). Some blogs act as online diaries with personal opinions while others comment on a specific topic. Blogs can offer an alternative, less formal source of information about recent news events and current affairs that could be useful to health services researchers. This edition of 'What's on the web' helps you

identify relevant blogs, create your own blog and reviews two blogs that focus on health services.

If you would like to alert readers to useful web pages or suggest topics for this column, please send details to:

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Finding health blogs

Identifying good quality health blogs from the millions that are available can be difficult. However, there are blog search engines that can help and here we look at two of the more useful: Technorati, which searches for blogs on any topic and Medworm, a specialized blog search engine that concentrates on medical and health related blogs.

<http://technorati.com/>



Technorati, established in 2002, searches exclusively for English language blogs and blog posts. As it is a real-time search engine, users are able to find the very latest blog posts. For inclusion in Technorati a blog needs to

have recent posts, original content and not be excessively commercial in nature. Each blog is given a score called the Technorati Authority, which reflects its 'standing and influence in the blogosphere', a useful criteria when deciding which blogs to read.

The Technorati Blog Directory can be browsed by category and, at the time of access, there were over 1300 health blogs listed. They are presented in topical Technorati Authority order, with the highest scoring blogs being presented first. Each blog has a link to a summary page provided by Technorati, allowing you to check further details about the content and author(s) of a blog before viewing the blog itself. Although a useful feature, the summary pages differ in the amount of detail provided.

For a more focused search, the search box on the homepage allows searching by keywords or phrases. There is an option to search for blogs about your topic of interest or blog postings. The facility to search for blog postings is helpful if you wish to find out the latest opinions from a variety of blogs about a health issue. Once a search has been performed there are options to refine the search if needed. Options include changing the authority level, which by default is set to search for blogs with high authority, and widening the search to news sites as well as blogs.

An alternative to Technorati is Medworm <http://www.medworm.com/>, a search engine focusing on the latest medical information. It is smaller than Technorati but the material is handpicked and checked to ensure its relevance to health and medicine. Its blog directory is a useful feature that categorises blogs by speciality such as epidemiology or health care management. Unfortunately, Medworm does not search for blog postings in real-time. The most recent blog postings

retrieved from Medworm are usually published the day before, while Technorati is able to retrieve blog postings from an hour ago. Nevertheless, Medworm does provide a topic-based alternative to the more general search provided by Technorati.

Compiling blogs

As well as reading other people's blogs, anyone with access to a computer and the Internet is able to create a blog of their own. There are many tools to assist the would-be blogger, including sites which host blogs, such as Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com/start>) and LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>), and advice on writing blogs. In addition to the Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics (<http://medbloggercode.com/>) sites such as Prologger (<http://www.prologger.net/>) provide helpful information and tips on blog writing and publishing for both beginners and more experienced bloggers.



The Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics (HBCE), designed in 2007, provides some indication of the quality and ethical standards of health care blogs compiled by professionals and patients. To display their code of ethics logo, bloggers need to adhere to their guidelines and, once approved, members are then included on the HBCE site, so that in theory the user has access to a list of good quality health and medical blogs. There are currently over 150 blogs listed on the Medical Blogs list, and over 60 blogs on the Patient Blogs list. The HBCE has five criteria: clear representation of perspective; confidentiality; commercial disclosure; reliability of information; and courtesy. To gain approval, a blogger has to submit details of their blog. How the approvals process works is not clear from the website.

The concept of the HBCE site is commendable. For blog writers it provides useful guidelines, indicating acceptable levels of information and writing standards for providing a good quality blog. From a reader's point of view, this site acts as a shortcut to some of the better quality health care blogs available. There are,

however, some problems. The HBCE relies on bloggers to actively submit their blog to the site – it is not proactive in identifying blogs, so many blogs of excellent quality and content will not be included. Judging by the date of the most recently approved blogs, the site does not appear to have been updated since December 2009 and it is unclear how frequently new sites are added. Details of the members of the HBCE and their relevant qualifications and experience are not provided, so there is no indication of who decides whether a blog should be included. There also appeared to be some problems with the way that the site is monitored. All the recent comments on the site's home page are advertisements and links to unrelated commercial sites, so the site is obviously open to abuse.

Examples

Blogs can be useful way for policy-makers to find out public opinion on health stories in the news. There are two types of blog that fall into this category: blogs that cover all health-related news, but are not affiliated to any particular newspaper and those that are part of a particular publication.



Covering Health (<http://www.healthjournalism.org/blog/>) is an example of the former. It is produced by the Association of Healthcare Journalists, an independent not-for-profit organization based in the USA. Their aim is to improve the quality of health care reporting. The site acts as a one-stop research and inspiration tool for newspaper writers. Since, like journalists, policy-makers need to keep up-to-date on health-related news, this website provides a potential shortcut to the top health care stories of the day.

Current posts appear on the front screen in chronological order. Each post is filed under one or more broad headings (e.g. health policy, nursing). These appear as hyperlinks on the right hand side of the screen and remain there regardless of where the visitor

goes on the site. These headings, along with tags added to the bottom of each post constitute the main navigational tool of the site. The tags are more specific. For example, a post filed under nursing might have a tag for nurse practitioners. There is also provision for simple searching using a search box. The search engine is fairly intuitive; the default setting is to use 'and', and phrase searching is available through the use of quotation marks. A more sophisticated search facility is not available but, given the nature of the site, the current provision seems appropriate.

Given that currency is of the essence in the media, the fact that the blog is updated on a regular basis (generally at least once a day) is reassuring. Older stories can be accessed through the archives, which go back to November 2008. Comments are encouraged but are moderated, which may explain what looks like a fairly small number of responses. Posts can be shared through Twitter, Facebook, and email. Overall, the site is easy to navigate and contains current material, so could be recommended to both policy-makers and journalists.



The Joe Public blog (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic+health>) is run by the British newspaper,

the Guardian, and is an example of the second type of health blog aimed at the general public. The health section is a subset of the main Joe Public blog, but it is a little tricky to find it from within the Guardian website (a search on Google is probably the easiest way to locate it). Once it has been found, however, the blog is bright and clearly designed to appeal to a different demographic than Covering Health. It features a picture per story and very little text in the first instance (though, readers have the opportunity to follow a link to the full story) and this makes it easy and enjoyable to browse. The entries are written by staff members of the Guardian and cover current health stories. While Covering Health focuses on reporting the facts of a story and comments by main players, Joe Public concentrates on providing an informed discussion of newspaper stories. There is a sense of public involvement, with some posts attracting a large number of comments (one post is now officially closed for comments after attracting nearly 100). People who wish to comment have to register with the site first, though it is not obvious whether comments are moderated.

Like most blogs, the site provides facilities to share posts on Facebook, Twitter and so forth. Regrettably, unlike Covering Health, Joe Public provides no search tools or other navigational aids. It is possible to search the paper as a whole, or the Society section which hosts the blog, but not the blog itself. Presumably the thinking is that, for such a time sensitive service, the provision of posts in a chronological order is all that is required. Despite this drawback, Joe Public is a good example of how a newspaper blog can create debate around health topics. Whether you prefer this or Covering Health will depend on your needs.

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