



Online Communities

Only 20 years ago, the average biologist started to venture online for more than blast searches and email. Topic driven newsgroups were the first communities, from women in biology to yeast genetics to recipes to Star Trek movies. It wasn't long before the Web arrived to offer a new user-friendly interface, and the rest, as they say, is history. The great promise of the internet is the ability to reach across continents to collect information and establish connections. The challenge is ensuring the accuracy of information, and achieving functional interactions amid the noise.

Finding the Information You Need

For a student or postdoc embarking on a new project, after the obligatory literature search on Pubmed¹ it is worthwhile to search on Google² or other engines. This will find many pages of information or lecture notes provided by generous fellow-scientists. For example, are you working on chromatin? Try The Chromatin Structure & Function Page.³ Maybe you are new to phosphorylation. You might investigate Kinweb⁴ or Kinase.com.⁵ Perhaps you are venturing into fission yeast for the first time. All sorts of information can be found on Pombe.net.⁶

The advantage to all this information is that it's freely available, but how do you evaluate the completeness and accuracy of an

internet resource? Part of Google's algorithm is based on the number of links to a page, which provides a market-based valuation—if lots of people link to it, there is presumably a higher likelihood of accuracy. Affiliation with a university or reputable vendor site, and an identifiable individual or entity responsible for

the information, is also an important indicator. But ultimately, it's a buyer-beware system, not unlike the judgment required for non-reviewed data presented at a meeting.

All that information may be freely available, but it is still protected by copyright. If you would like to cite a page, or borrow an image, you should contact the webmaster of the site for permission.

Meeting People and Getting Advice

Now you have some background, but you would like more information about a method, or perhaps you need career guidance. How do you find your expert? Specialist sites often

have lists of investigators carrying out research in their area; for example, the Saccharomyces Genome Database has a list of yeast colleagues.⁷ The people running the sites that you investigated above also may have relevant expertise.

Should you just email your question to someone who is listed? There is nothing wrong with that in principle, but if the answer is easily found in the literature, or from a colleague in

the next lab, or even on the recipient's website, it is likely to be annoying. So do your homework first, and make any question a thoughtful one. A mailing list is a way to ask a question of a large group of people, but since it is a widely distributed email, the same rules apply.

Less intrusive is a discussion forum. These

are available on Bionet,⁸ or as individual forums such as those on the ASCB Community Forum⁹ or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹⁰ Because discussion groups can be read at will, posting a message there is less intrusive than an email, but it relies on people with the knowledge you need actually reading the site and responding.

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Everyone has an opinion

Recently, a new internet phenomenon is under-way: web logs, or blogs, which are on-line diaries, often with associated discussion forums. Although blogs cover all topics, they are slanted towards politics; comparatively few address science-specific issues, such as The Panda's Thumb on evolution.¹¹ Blogs can be tempting places to engage in discussion and debate. They can also be dangerous time-sinks for a busy scientist.

Limiting Exposure

Once you put yourself on-line, particularly on discussion boards or web sites, you have created an internet persona, which has two negative considerations. First, the spammers' robots will harvest your email address and drown your account in unsolicited advertisements. This can be thwarted in part by modifying your email address in your online posts, for example by spelling the @ sign as AT, or adding extra words like REMOVE in the address. Or, you might set up a free web-mail account for a "posting" address that won't clog your professional account. The second issue

is one of exposure. You are now a public figure. Consider, before you press the POST button on a potentially intemperate argument, whether you want your future employers to see it when they Google your name.

Finally, there is a tendency to consider the internet closer than is the colleague down the hall. While you should enjoy and benefit from your electronic connections, don't neglect the real people in your work environment. They are the ones to comment on your papers, write your letters of recommendation, and share that morning cup of coffee. ■

—Susan Forsburg

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¹<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?DB=pubmed>

²<http://www.google.com>

³<http://www.chromatin.us/chrom.html>

⁴<http://bioinfo.itb.cnr.it/kinweb/>

⁵<http://kinase.com/>

⁶<http://www.pombe.net>

⁷<http://www.yeastgenome.org/ComContents.shtml>

⁸<http://www.bio.net/>

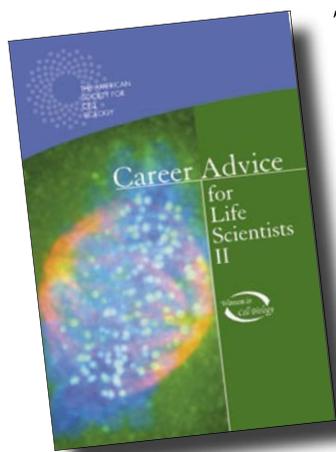
⁹<http://www.ascb.org/forums/upload/index.php>

¹⁰<http://chronicle.com/forums/>

¹¹<http://www.pandasthumb.org/>

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Career Advice for Life Scientists II



The ASCB Women in Cell Biology Committee has published two volumes of *Career Advice for Life Scientists*.

Career Advice for Life Scientists II, a new compilation of selected WICB columns from the *ASCB Newsletter*, is available free by contacting the ASCB

at 301-347-9300; ascbinfo@ascb.org;

www.ascb.org. Postage is not included.

CALSII as well as *CALS* are also accessible in PDF at www.ascb.org.

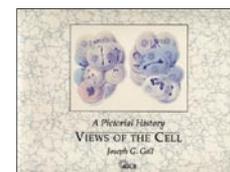
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