

ScienceFeed: Interview with Ijad Madisch

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February 15, 2010

Microblogging is blogging of short text messages, photos or other media and is best exemplified by Twitter. Twitter use has grown tremendously in 2009, and this also includes many scientists.¹ FriendFeed is a another microblogging tool that not only allows sending of short text messages, but connects them together in groups and discussions threads similar to what you can do in online forums. FriendFeed, especially The Life Scientists group has been a popular place for many scientists for the last 18 months or so. Cameron Neylon wrote a good introduction to the service back in June 2008: FriendFeed for scientists: what, why, and how?. FriendFeed is a great tool for conference blogging, and the ISBM 2008 conference was probably the first scientific conference where it was used extensively, resulting in a PLoS Computational Biology paper.² FriendFeed is also often used to comment on blog posts, and here it is competing for attention with comments that are put directly on a blog. FriendFeed is a good example for a generic Web 2.0 tool that is much more useful to scientists than many Web 2.0 tools targeted specifically at scientists (the Facebooks for scientists).

FriendFeed was acquired by Facebook in August 2009, and users started to worry about the long-term future of FriendFeed. An Open Source version of the FriendFeed web server was recently released as Tornado (source code on GitHub). Although other services (including Facebook) offer similar functionality, no service has (yet) emerged as an alternative popular with scientists. FriendFeed use seemed to be declining at the two recent Science Online London 2009 and ScienceOnline2010 conferences, as more and more people were using Twitter.

Last Tuesday Google Buzz was released. Buzz is also a microblogging service, tightly integrated with Google Mail and Google Reader. It offers many of the same features as FriendFeed, and because it integrates with Google Mail, it has a large number of potential users from the start – including a large number of people involved in the Science Blogosphere. Buzz will certainly get some of the features that are still missing, e.g. an easy way to import content from other sources, including a bookmarklet. And Buzz works very well on iPhone and Android phones and there also uses location information – e.g. all the Buzz discussions near you. But at the moment many people wonder how best to integrate Buzz with FriendFeed and Twitter, and all the other online tools they use – it doesn't make sense to read the same content again and again on all

these services.

In this context it is very interesting to see ScienceFeed launching as a new microblogging service this week. ScienceFeed in many ways is similar to FriendFeed, but tries to add features of particular interest to scientists. I spoke with Ijad Madisch about ScienceFeed.

1. What is ScienceFeed?

ScienceFeed is science as it happens, communicated through a microblogging platform. Conceptualized and designed by scientists, it is a bridge between online scientific networking platforms, scientific databases, and the wider online science community. The ScienceFeed platform allows users to post microblogs, sometimes just a few sentences, on scientific headlines, new findings, controversy, conferences and ideas related to science. Community members can follow the feeds of fellow members and comment on topics in which they are interested, allowing real-time communication and transfer of ideas.

ScienceFeed is an interactive and dynamic platform – like science itself. Here, scientists, journalists, librarians, students, and those with an interest in science, will be able to communicate in a way that has no borders. Individuals from all over the world are able to participate and observe, helping to make science accessible to all. Integral to the concept of Science 2.0 is having online resources that are archivable and searchable – ScienceFeed will do just this. Science is not limited to the laboratory: it happens through interactions of communities. ScienceFeed is excited to build such a community.

2. How is ScienceFeed different from FriendFeed?

In basic functionality, ScienceFeed isn't much different to FriendFeed. However, I think with the help of the community we will develop and add applications to the platform that could make it very efficient for scientific communication. There are two differences from FriendFeed which we have already implemented: 1) Specific scientific publications can easily be searched for and then entered as a linked-in reference within a feed, and, 2) Groups can be marked as an event (e.g. a conference). My vision is to have event streams in ScienceFeed, which then can be visualized and presented in a much better way. However, the most important part is that we listen to the feedback of the community and develop specific applications based on their ideas and feedback.

3. What special features does ScienceFeed provide for conference microblogging

An important feature from ScienceFeed is that groups can be marked as a specific event, such as a conference. Administrators of these groups will be able to import hashtags from Twitter, so all tweets will be aggregated and displayed within this group. A possibility for future growth is the integration of an entire conference program (sessions, panels, etc.) into the group, which then can be commented

on by group members. It is important to us that the scientific community has an input into the development of this feature so that we can build a stronger, more efficient platform based on the needs of our users.

4. Can you import references into ScienceFeed only via your reference database, or also via CiteULike or other bookmarking service?

Martin, thank you so much for this great idea. Based on your feedback we worked hard to make this happen before launch. Yes, now ScienceFeed can import from other bookmarking services such as CiteULike or Connotea. Furthermore ScienceFeed supports CoiNS, which identifies automatically based on a weblink whether or not bibliographic data is in the specified URL.

5. How is ScienceFeed different from Twitter?

There are several differences, but the largest are that in ScienceFeed there is no character limitation and groups can be tagged as a specific event – facilitating real-time, online communication about the event.

6. What is the advantage of having a social networking tool specifically for scientists?

I think the most important part is the non-dilution of information in an environment where the platform and focus is specifically on science. Consider the following: You can find a biomedical scientific paper by searching in Google, but you could also use PubMed, which has a high probability of faster and better results. It is the same as within ResearchGATE: You have large groups (Methods, Immunology, Neuroscience, Philosophy, etc.) with a very focused population, which again makes your search more directed and efficient with better results.

7. What is the relationship between ScienceFeed and ResearchGATE?

ScienceFeed will be a scientific microblogging platform completely autonomous from ResearchGATE, because I think they target the same group, but with various usage patterns.

The publication reference tool used for inserting papers into ScienceFeed accesses the custom-built database of ResearchGATE. This database now has a public API which makes it possible for everyone to connect to the ResearchGATE literature database. I think that microarticles which are pretty successful in Researchgate (published in our ResearchBLOG) could be a part of ScienceFeed as well. I see ScienceFeed as a platform which will be useful to various scientific platforms as Mendeley, Academia, ResearchGATE, etc. It could be a platform that helps connect all these different platforms.

8. Will there be a publicly available API for ScienceFeed?

Yes, there will be an API.

9. What are your responsibilities in ScienceFeed?

I am, as in ResearchGATE, one of the co-founders and a kind of CEO. I want to build a team of innovative and forward-thinking individuals to help develop ideas and work conceptually on the future directions of ScienceFeed.

10. What did you do before working on ScienceFeed?

I am a co-founder and CEO of ResearchGATE and I am also working at Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School, in Boston as a researcher. Before ResearchGATE I studied Medicine and Computer Science and completed my doctoral thesis in Virology, while working for some time in Gastroenterology as a medical doctor.

11. Could you provide contact information for people that have further questions about ScienceFeed?

I can be contacted anytime at: ijad.madisch@sciencefeed.com.

References

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