



We Are Blogging—Now What?

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Many people start a blog and then weeks, months, or years later begin to wonder how they can take it to the next level.

This was our experience with the AGA (American Gastroenterological Association) Journals Blog (<http://journalsblog.gastro.org/>). We started a blog as an experiment, in 2010, to see if we could use it to promote findings published in the AGA journals *Gastroenterology* and *Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology*.

The AGA publications team had already been using social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to promote our journals. We thought that a blog discussing particularly interesting features, as well as controversies, of our journals' articles might be fun and interesting not only for medical researchers but also patients. We decided to write the articles in a newsy yet scholarly format—not too technical, yet not too informal.

Our blog gradually became successful—monthly site visits increased from an average of 1,000 in 2010 to over 8,000 in 2013. Many researchers and patients alike subscribed to the blog and gave us positive feedback. Much of this success can be credited to the marketing plan we established. It included featuring the blog prominently on the AGA and AGA journals' websites, promoting content on our journals' Facebook pages as well as on the AGA Twitter feed, and reaching out to authors and reviewers of articles we blogged about via personal emails—we encouraged them to initiate discussion in the comments section.

However, by the end of 2013, we noticed that after three years of increasing visits, numbers were starting to level off. What could we do to attract more readers and make the blog even more exciting?

We decided the first step to revamping the blog was research. We asked other successful bloggers to look at our site and offer advice and read books about blogging. We also decided to work with the

web experts in our communications department, who had been involved in the creation of the AGA's other blogs. We asked them to bring their talent for custom blog creation to our platform.

We also explored other science and non-science blog sites. We tried to figure out what made some blogs attractive, focused, and easy to read, whereas others seemed uninteresting or too complicated to navigate.

The first thing we decided to do was make the blog more visually appealing. We changed the color scheme and design to not only look more interesting, but to align with the parameters of the AGA brand to ensure a cohesive look among all AGA products.

Because our old blog site had been referred to as “a wall of text,” we incorporated many more images into the homepage. These range from stock art to compelling figures included in the journal articles.

We also needed a major overhaul of the blog's layout. When readers arrive at the homepage, they now see titles and first paragraphs of the most recent posts, rather than the entire text of the most recent post. This allows readers to quickly scan for topics that might catch their interest.

Finally, we created broad post categories (*e.g.* “Cancer,” “GI Tract,” “Technology”) to make it easier for readers to easily find all posts on a particular topic of interest. These article categories are noted in the main navigation menu, as well as in a new sidebar. The sidebar features a variety of navigation options, including the most popular posts, recent comments, an option to subscribe to the blog, and covers from the latest journal issues (with links to the journals).

But changing the design was not enough—we also wanted to increase the number of posts we published, knowing that almost all bloggers say the more often you post, the better. We had previously been posting once per week (newsy article

summaries of about 500 words). We decided to try posting twice per week. We have added one shorter post that presents an interesting medical image, clinical observation, podcast, video abstract, or even a Q&A with an author of an article that we think would be of particular interest to our readership. The idea is to experiment with new types of posts with this second weekly blog post and see which kind generate the most interest (*i.e.*, traffic).

Successful bloggers say that it is important to include many links within the text of the posts. This makes articles more interactive, and can help keep them shorter—we can just link to important background information, rather than using text to explain it.

We added links to the articles we discuss right in the first paragraph of the post (rather than provid-

ing a full article citation at the end). We did this with the hopes of increasing traffic to our journal sites (more traffic equals potentially more online advertising). We also added informational links (to the National Institutes of Health and other reliable sites) for terms such as disease names, drugs, and relevant research articles. Posts now also include links to previous posts, to keep readers within our blog site.

Our new and improved blog has only been live for about a month, so it is hard to tell if these changes have increased readership or driven more traffic to our journals' websites. However, we all feel that the blog looks better and provides more information for readers, which is its overall goal.

If you have any other ideas for ways to improve blog, please send them our way (via KNovak@gastro.org or bsimpson@gastro.org).

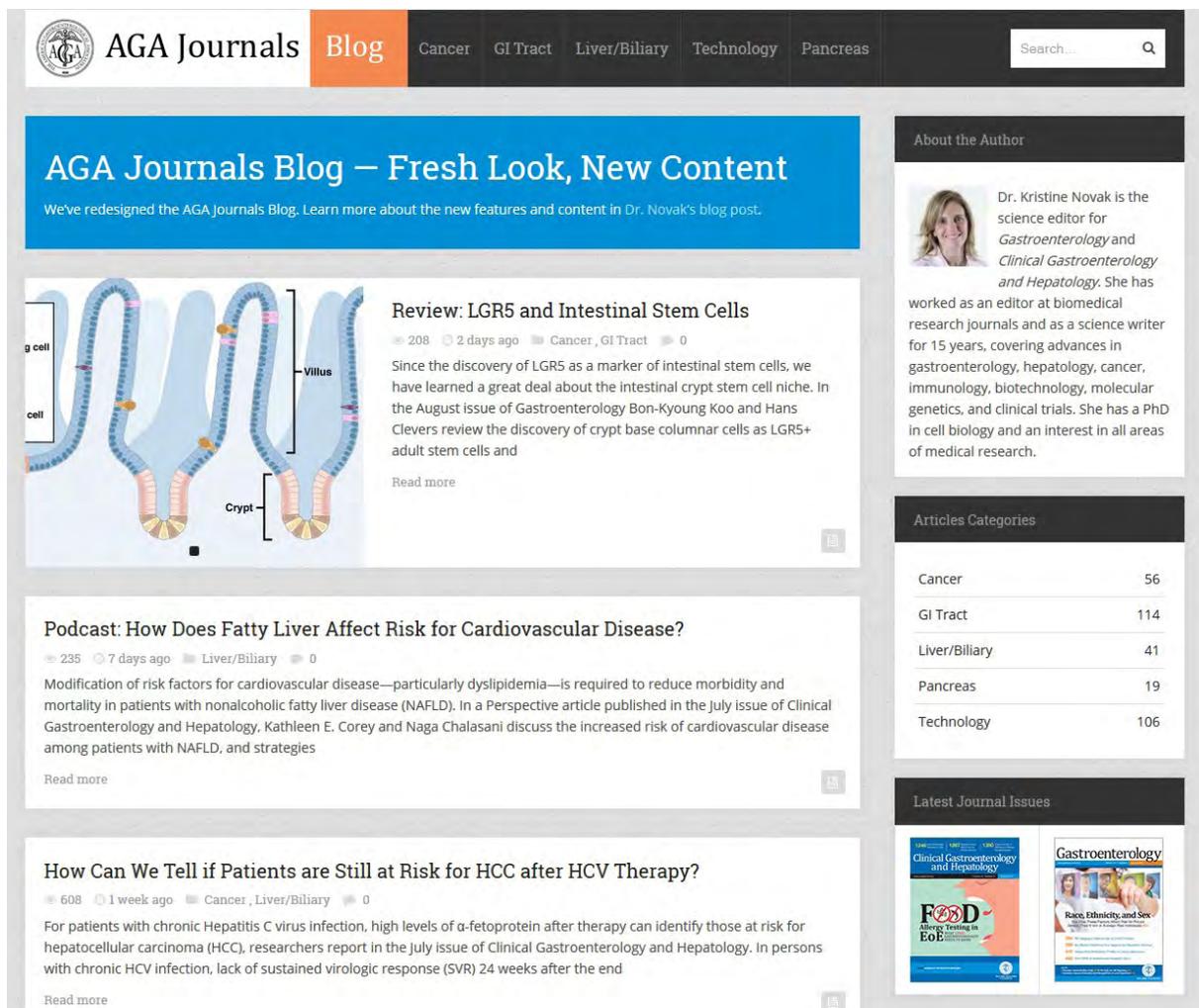
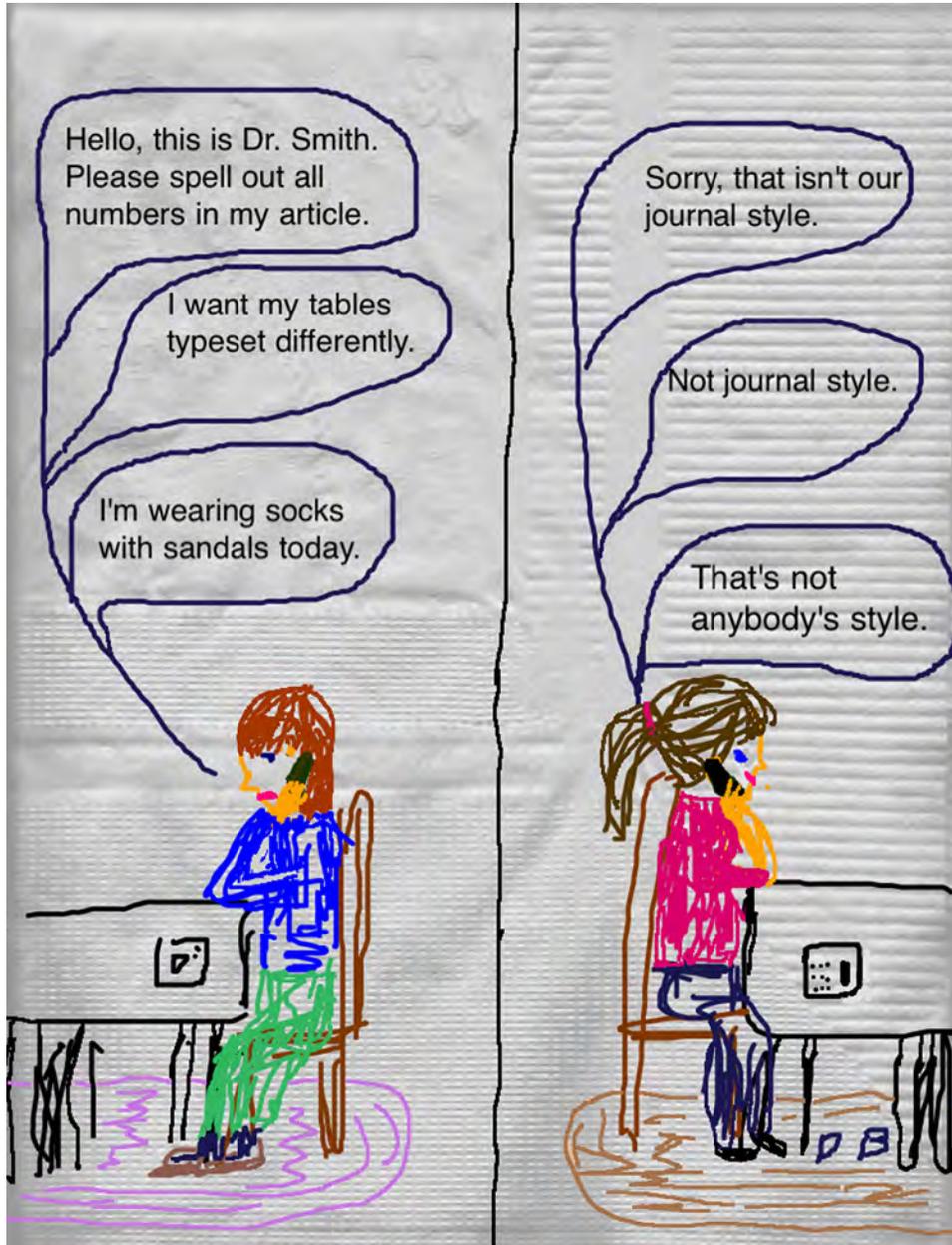


Figure 1: Screen shot of the AGA Journals Blog



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