From the Editor

Social Science

The Editors, *BioTechniques*

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The recent announcement that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is creating a “Facebook for scientists” means yet another group is moving out into the turbulent waters of social media. The \$12.2-million NIH effort aims to create an interface where scientists can seek out collaborators and researchers with similar interests. The effort will cull data on these researchers from university web sites and journals to generate research summaries and lists of relevant publications and projects. This will mean that researchers will not have to actively update their pages in order to stay current within the new system.

Facebook itself has thrived due in large measure to the interest of its users in updating their pages and status with regular frequency, leading those connected to these users to check in with equal frequency. The same holds true for Twitter (those who continue to update their Tweets regularly are read most often) and blogs (post more often, get more readers who respond). In the case of the NIH effort, where most of the updating is proposed to be automatic, the question arises: what will this site offer that LinkedIn or other social sites—including ResearchGATE, LabRoots, OpenWetWare, LabSpaces, or any of the only mildly popular online scientist resources—do not? And what will prompt researchers to visit this site regularly, find collaborators, or discuss research ideas?

NIH’s effort could encounter the same issues and concerns that all the others have encountered in applying social networking to scientists, generating repeat, and fostering interactive users. Although the NIH’s automatic update model does deal with this to some extent, will researchers visit regularly and take advantage of what the site has to offer? Working in a lab is generally a solitary pursuit: most scientists work on a project and only discuss it with direct collaborators until the later stages just before publication. But although this is the working model, it does not mean that these researchers will *not* use social media during their projects; it simply means that getting them to the point of use could prove harder than with other groups.

The tipping point for increased social media usage by scientists might actually come during the next five to ten years (which is perfectly timed with the NIH site’s debut). Most likely this will not come from any advance in the interface or a unique web site model; instead the change will come when younger investigators get their first positions in the academic world. Since these researchers will be more familiar with social media and interactive web sites, they will in turn be more trusting of using these sites and updating their own information. And as these investigators train the next generation of scientists, the idea of using social media to advance basic and applied research will gain traction and become more mainstream among all scientists.

So the NIH effort could find its greatest success by initially motivating young scientists—graduate students and assistant professors, the ones most likely to initially take the plunge into this form of social media—to use the site, and then using those scientists to evangelize the virtues of the site and expound on its interactions with other colleagues. We may recall that this is much akin to what happened with Facebook itself: teenagers and young adults first identified the use and benefit of the site while their parents entered this virtual world much later (and much to the chagrin of their children!).

We applaud the initiative and efforts of NIH in creating a new sharing site for researchers around the globe. Science is becoming an increasingly collaborative enterprise, and there exists a need to assist researchers in finding necessary information from peers quickly. Through continuing efforts such as this, and the emergence of the next generation of scientist raised on social media, it is only a matter of time before science finally does have its global “Facebook.” As always, post your thoughts and comments at our Molecular Biology Forums under “To the Editor” (<http://molecularbiology.forums.biotechniques.com>) or send an email directly to the editors (bioeditor@biotechniques.com).

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