

Welcome to Scientia Pro Publica #26

by Dan Vorhaus

In honor of DNA Day, the Genomics Law Report is completing its transformation into a one stop shop for the best in blog wrangling by hosting Scientia Pro Publica #26 and [Blawg Review #260](#) in the same week. We think it fitting that these two august reviews should appear side-by-side at the GLR, which itself [sits firmly at the intersection of science and the law](#).

For those unfamiliar with [Scientia Pro Publica](#), it is a traveling compilation of the best blog writing *targeted to the public* about science, medicine, the environment and technology. Though more recently arrived, it is to science blogging what [Blawg Review](#) is to legal blogging. Our hope is that pairing the two will encourage all of our readers, regardless of background, to explore some of the best writing from previously unknown corners of the internet.

The occasion for this 25th 26th edition of Scientia Pro Publica – [DNA Day](#) – is one that is doubtless well-known to scientists, but if you'd like to know more please see the [introduction to Blawg Review #260](#). As for the semi-creative counting, earlier this month Scientia Pro Publica featured a pair of 24th editions: one by [Andrew at 360 Degree Skeptic](#) and another by (a different) [Andrew at Southern Fried Science](#). Which makes this, technically, the 26th edition of Scientia Pro Publica. If there's one thing a lawyer hosting a science blog review can contribute it's an increased sensitivity to technicalities. On to the submissions!

Name's Ash. Housewares. Our first submission comes from Bob O'Hara of *Deep Thoughts and Silliness*, who considers the effects of the [bits of less-than-prime Icelandic real estate](#) that have been floating above Europe for the past several days and generally causing much coughing and air travel delays. Also, at *Eruptions*, Erik Klemetti [speculates on the link between thawing ice caps and volcanism](#).

O'Hara also inadvertently supplies the theme for the remainder of this edition of Scientia Pro Publica: a [classic film](#) that, at its heart, tells the tale of one man, lacking in formal scientific training, attempting to convey certain scientific truths to a skeptical public. Apart from a few minor details - most notably the lack of a [serviceable Deadite-felling implement](#) - the GLR is perhaps not so dissimilar.

Now I swear the next one of you primates even *touches* me... Beast Ape, lead primate of the *Beast Ape and the Bleeding Heart Baboons* blog, writes about [the price of grooming in redfronted lemurs](#), which can apparently be explained within a biological market framework. Meanwhile, at *From C to Carnivore*, Sam W reviews research showing that social learning, which was thought to be restricted to primates and other animals that live in social groups, [may be possible in non-social species, in this case red-footed tortoises](#). Finally, *Time Travelling* brings us a [new tarsier-like fossil primate discovered in the Eastern Pyrenees, Spain](#).

But what of all those sweet words you spoke in private? Oh, that's just what we call pillow talk, baby, that's all. We covered the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) withdrawal of its libel claims against journalist Simon Singh in [Blawg Review #260](#), but it's not just lawyers who are interested in the case. At *Jack of Kent*, [Stephen Curry has a guest post](#) explaining why, as a scientist, what struck him was the unscientific nature of the BCA's action. Curry finds this suspicion confirmed in the [Court of Appeals ruling](#) which led the BCA to drop its claims.

No. No. Oh God I slept too long! A quote from the director's cut is fitting for a post from Bora Zivkovic of *A Blog Around the Clock*, which takes us back to the Arctic and asks [whether reindeer have a circadian stop-watch instead of a clock](#). Zivkovic's post earns a special mention for attempting to answer what would seem to be a near-impossible question: "what does a reindeer's circadian system have to do with me?" Plenty, as Zivkovic explains. Reindeer easily tolerate conditions (perpetual light in summer, perpetual darkness in winter) that, like jet-lag or a hotel in Times Square, would be highly problematic for most humans. Understanding how, and adapting that knowledge to improve human circadian system functioning, is nothing to yawn at.

We can take these Deadites, we can take 'em! With science! Jeremy Lent of *Tyranny of the Prefrontal Cortex* is using science to take on the skeletons of philosophers past, specifically René Descartes. Recently, *The New York Times* ran an op-ed from Adam Shriver that proposed animals might one day be [genetically engineered to feel no pain as they are processed for human consumption](#). Lent traces the roots of Shriver's proposal back to Descartes and his belief that "animals are automata," and argues that we must [avoid creating "a true Cartesian nightmare where all that's left are we humans and our own artificially constructed environment, engineered for our consumption."](#)

Look, maybe I didn't say every tiny syllable, no. But basically I said them, yeah. Memory is important. That's true whether it's remembering the magic phrase needed to swipe the Necronomicon without unleashing an army of Deadites or, as Stephen Curry of *Reciprocal Space* writes, understanding why the [adaptive immune system's "memory" is formed with fixed structures, not liquid](#).

I got a bone to pick with you. Andrew at *360 Degree Skeptic* is taking issue with the lack of attention paid to null results. [Racial Differences in Self-Esteem and the Neglected Null](#) examines a study correlating self-esteem with age and race and laments the lack of attention given to non-differences, in this case the fact that blacks and whites had similar self-esteem levels for most of their lives, until diverging in old age. Meanwhile, at *Out walking the dog*, Melissa [investigates the appearance of coyotes on Manhattan](#) and says the time has come to accept their presence, and start discussing what to do about them.

First you wanna kill me, now you wanna kiss me. Blow. We all know that environment can play a significant role in shaping personality (see, e.g., Sheila [before](#) and [after](#) meeting the Deadites), but what about genetics? At *Living the Scientific Life (Scientist, Interrupted)* GrrlScientist (who is also the Scientia Pro Publica coordinator) asks [what Great Tits reveal about the genetics of personality](#). The research is interesting, but GrrlScientist is appropriately skeptical when assessing the impact of such limited association findings (in Great Tit populations, no less) to our understanding of how genetic variants influence personality traits in human populations.

Speaking of association studies, Stephen Turner of *Getting Genetics Done* [shares his thoughts](#) on the [Cell paper by Jon McClelland and](#)

[Mary-Claire King](#) criticizing the common-disease-common-variant (CDCV) hypothesis and the genome-wide association studies (GWAS) developed around this hypothesis. Turner's commentary - and the underlying essay itself - are both worth a read, although, given the rapidly declining cost of sequencing, it's possible that the ongoing GWAS vs. whole-genome sequencing debate will be mooted before it drags on too much longer.

Don't touch that please, your primitive intellect wouldn't understand alloys and compositions and things with... molecular structures . Demonstrating yet again that their intellects are far from primitive, cephalopods are now breaking into the film business. Several people, including [PZ Myers of Pharyngula](#), brought to my attention this story of an octopus grabbing a diver's video camera for an impromptu underwater documentary: [Life Inside a Fleeing Octopus](#). No word yet on whether the diver's video camera was high definition although, if so, [that could explain the attempted theft](#).

Alright you Primitive Screwheads, listen up! You see this? This... is my boomstick! Finally, we all remember how Ash ruled the 14th Century with a chainsaw and a twelve-gauge double-barreled Remington (S-Mart's top of the line). But can you imagine what he would have done with an iPhone? The latest installment of look-what-my-iPhone-can-do comes from Alex Wild of *Myrmecos*, who has [rigged his with a magnifying glass for some impressive close-up insect photography](#).

And with that we close the books on Scientia Pro Publica #26. Next week's host is [Melliferax](#), so remember to get your submissions in early and often.