

FINDING READERS IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

A project building an audience for a blog at the intersection of mothering and beekeeping
<http://www.bumblehive.com>

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FINDING READERS IN A CROWDED ROOM
How multi-tasking Mom Bloggers attract audiences inside and outside
the parent blogosphere

Suzanne Langlois

John Fennell, Project Chair

ABSTRACT

Women publish nearly four million blogs that fall under the genre known as Mommy Blogs: written by women, for women, primarily on the subjects of family life and parenting. Many Mommy Bloggers count readers in the thousands.

For my research, I sought to answer the questions: How do Mom Bloggers attract readers? Do bloggers with strong followings actively pursue their readers? How do readers find bloggers? During the Spring of 2013, I researched audience building within the genre and interviewed 10 Mommy Bloggers about their experiences.

The theoretical framework I used is the Uses and Gratifications theory, which is conducive to research on blog audience because bloggers are blog readers themselves, and bloggers know a lot about the identity and motivations of their readers because of the interactive nature of the platform. The method I used is interviewing, with open-ended questions, in order to give respondents an opportunity to relay information unprompted.

The research reveals six primary tactics used to attract readers: 1. Reading and commenting on other blogs, with the expectation of reciprocity. 2. Promoting their blog on Facebook and Twitter. 3. Posting at least once a week. 4. Writing with a consistent voice. 5. Specializing in a niche topic. 6. Guest posting and publishing widely.

INTRODUCTION

I have a compulsion to write, and to share information. I suppose that's part of a journalist's mindset. I also have a compulsion to create an enterprise at the intersection of my personal passions. I think that's part of an entrepreneur's mindset. Ditto my eagerness to tackle projects I know nothing about and yet, somehow, manage to stumble through, learning from failure and heartened by happy accidents, good luck and hard work.

I've been eager to finish my Master's degree since I left the program 20 years ago. I've also been eager to fuse the two professional passions I developed during the intervening years working first as a staff writer at *The Riverfront Times*, then as an entrepreneur, founding and operating Kaldi's Coffee Company. For my professional project, I devised a scheme to mesh writing with entrepreneurship by creating a parenting blog. My biggest coup in the whole process was recruiting a supportive group of J-School faculty who had never taught me, read me, graded me, in fact, had barely met me, to serve on my committee. Like an entrepreneur sitting in front of a group of potential investors, I had to sell myself. I got lucky. They bought in.

I spent 14 weeks designing, building, programming, troubleshooting and writing a blog called BumbleHive. It's a start-up. I will continue to write the blog, change and improve it. I'll continue to learn about the blog platform, audience building, photography and writing. I will also continue to experiment with all aspects of the blog, with the ongoing goal of attracting readers and enhancing their experience.

Blogging is an intriguing publishing platform because it lends itself to individual media projects, and the only constraints are those the blogger imposes on herself. I have plans. Lifelong plans, involving a travel blog, a blog about women in Haiti, a mother-daughter collaboration blog. My professional project has inspired me to exploit the blog platform for its nimbleness and versatility. Blogging is a door leading back into journalism, mid-life, post-careers, as long as my goals are creative fulfillment and audience building. When my goals shift to include getting paid for blogging, I'll re-asses.

Ready, fire, aim.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

I divided my time between four primary activities during the course of my project.

Building my website - The first few weeks of my project were consumed with the logistics of setting up a website for my blog. I researched and selected content management systems, devised and registered a domain name, selected a host and programmed the site. Throughout my project I continued to modify and improve the design and infrastructure of the blog.

Posting to the blog - I posted at least two articles with photos to the blog every week. The posts related to parenting and backyard beekeeping.

Building an audience for the blog - I used a number of tactics to attract readers to the blog. I installed search engine optimization tools on the blog, which encouraged web browsers to find my site based on the keywords and phrases I indexed to each post. I read and commented on other women's blogs, primarily ones dealing with parenting and homemaking, and inserted a link to my blog in the commenter's identification boxes. I used Facebook and Twitter to advertise the blog and its weekly updates to friends and followers. I told neighbors, friends and family about my blog, and emailed them links. I told beekeepers in my local beekeeping club about my blog, and gave them the link.

Professional Development - Every week I explored a different topic that would make me a better blogger. I studied information to improve my writing, photography,

programming, social media, marketing and entrepreneurial skills. My professional development included: WordPress, Google Analytics and HootSuite tutorials; essays about writing by Joan Didion and John McPhee; TED Talks about entrepreneurial journalism; online classes about social media and marketing; articles about journalists and computer programming; PhotoShop lessons; books about idea spreading and storytelling by Seth Godin and Malcolm Gladwell; and start-up tactics from the writings of Peter Sims and Guy Kawasaki.

Field Notes Week 1

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Jan 11

to John, Joy, Jacqui, Mary

Dear Committee Members,

Happy New Year to you all. I started my project as planned on January 3. Here I give you my first Field Notes.

Weekly Project Highlights

I spent a fair amount of time in December looking at blogs to determine what design features I'd like to incorporate into mine, and what blogging software seemed most conducive. I settled on WordPress. I set up a free blog on WordPress.com, knowing that if the features turned out to be too limited, I could easily transfer it to WordPress.org, which isn't free but is much more customizable.

Blogging Tutorials and Forums- WordPress is open software, and as such offers many opportunities to learn from experienced users how to exploit its different features. I went through the WordPress.com and the WordPress.org tutorials and read through many of the forums on issues that seemed to generate many threads, as well as forums on programming.

Posts - I launched my blog, called Sticky Notes, at the end of December. I wrote a few posts, more to experiment around with layout, length, themes and photo display than to concentrate on written content. Here is a link to the blog: <http://stickynoteblog.com>.

Blog Reading - I read through a lot of bloggers' archives to observe readership over time (mostly by looking at comment counts and views stats) as well as how posts changed over time. I did this mostly to assess how bloggers introduce new readers into their ongoing narrative. I started compiling a list of blogs for my BlogRoll.

Professional Development - I read a book called *Little Bets - How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge From Small Discoveries*, by Peter Sims. I chose this book because it deals with strategically approaching work on a project in order to reach your desired goal. I found his techniques extremely applicable to starting a blog, but also to starting a research project, and even to resuming beekeeping. What I took away from the book was the importance of these 5 steps: 1. Experimentation - Try lots of things, fail quickly, respond and adapt. 2. Immersion - The best way to really understand something new is to just jump in and get involved. Don't waste time trying to learn as an outsider. 3. Define Problems - You can't fix a problem that you can't identify. 4. Be flexible - There are no set paths to large goals. Try lots of them. When something works ("small wins") keep on that track as long as it stays productive. 5. Repeat, retest, and redefine. Learning and improving stems from repeating processes over and over again and addressing problems along the way.

Work Issue

I am struggling with computer programming. The best blogs have great design and feedback features. This requires more programming knowledge than I have. I learned enough programming this week to know how little I know to get the results I'm looking

for. I'm always game to fill in holes in my knowledge, but I find programming thoroughly unenjoyable. So I come to this particular gap with neither background knowledge nor passion. I'm weighing whether to spend more time learning; outsourcing some of it; or just forgoing some of the features I've set my sights on.

Right now, I'm leaning toward the first two.

Research

I sent emails out to two bloggers introducing myself and requesting interviews: Anita Blanchard (This That and the Mother Thing) and Kim Voss (Women's Pages History.)

Goals for Next Week

I am going to tackle improving the design on my blog, and get it beyond its current skeletal state. I'm entirely unsatisfied with the presentation of the posts, particularly photos. I will also add some key features like a Blog Roll and about section. I think I should also decide if I'm switching over to WordPress.org, and if so I'll scout a host. I am meeting Monday with a friend who has volunteered to give me a crash course in essential programming for WordPress.org. I'm also going to participate as a reader on other bloggers' sites, to be more engaged in the community I'm trying to be a part of. I'll also set up a twitter account, and follow a few people. I'll contact a couple more bloggers and pester the ones I contacted this week if I haven't heard back.

Hope you are enjoying winter break, and having some good R&R! I drank more champagne and eggnog this season than I should admit to, but am happier for it.

- Suzanne

Field Notes Week 2

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Jan 18

to John, Mary, Joy, Jacqui

Dear Committee Members,

Inspired by the book I read last week about taking small bets early on in a start-up, I tried an entirely new approach to my blog this week. My reasoning was this: I have invested only a couple of weeks into Stickynoteblog, enough to know where my trouble spots are with it (the design) but not enough to feel like I'm in too deep to do some more experimentation. So I changed tack.

Weekly Project Highlights

New name - A little prickly voice in my head kept me worried about my blog name Sticky Note (stickynoteblog), because it's generic enough to potentially be used by others in many contexts. But I mentally lingered for weeks on how cute a name it would be for a beekeeping blog, and didn't due my due diligence. Well, last weekend I found a WordPress.com blog called Sticky Notes(<http://stickynotesblog.wordpress.com>), about an unemployed hipster. I knew I had to change names. (Hers is the same name as mine, except she has an "s.") It was a good time, as I was doing a design re-think. I also have your voices inside my head, from our conversations last fall, keeping me focused on the big WHY. (John Fennell asked me "Why your voice? Why this blog?" Joy Mayer said "Think about how your blog be a resource for your readers.") One of the answers to those questions is to stay niched as not only a "mommy blog" but also as a beekeeping blog.

I'm aiming for the intersection of motherhood and beekeeping. And in doing so, want to set up my blog with meaningful information for beekeepers. I did better due diligence this time around, and renamed my blog BumbleHive. I also made a logo for it. (I looked for naming tactics in a book I read a few months ago called *The Art of the Start*, by Guy Kawasaki. He advises a name that has some verb potential; sounds logical in relation to what you do; isn't trendy; and doesn't sound like known names of other enterprises.)

New Place - As I mentioned last week, I was looking into switching blog publishing sites from WordPress.com to WordPress.org. WordPress.com is essentially free, and hosts blogs as part of its service. It is certainly sufficient for my current needs. But in continuing to fulfill my blog's mission of truly being a resource, I know I will want to eventually take advantage of design customization, uploading plug-ins, adding pages, etc; but most importantly, maintaining full control of the site. Currently, the only limitation I really encountered with WordPress.com is the limited design "themes." I don't want a generic looking blog. I also want a "responsive" theme whose format automatically adapts to smaller screen sizes (tablets; smartphones.) I can easily customize a WordPress.com blog to make it less generic by buying upgrades, but, frankly, for the same amount of money, I'd rather jump over to WordPress.org and have a fuller range of options. I was also bothered by the fact that WordPress.com sometimes shows ads on users' blogs. So I switched accounts to WordPress.org.

I spent a day getting lessons in WordPress.org and in self-hosting from a friend of mine who has experience with both WordPress frameworks. It was eye-opening to see how

someone can really bootstrap a hosting site if they wanted. I chose to pay a host site, decemberpress. On the advice of my friend, I also decided to work on my blog before releasing it for public view, so that someone doesn't stumble onto my site while it's in its incubation state. I access it through a portal right now. I'll give myself next week to keep spiffing and adding content before I release it. Here's the link to it now: <http://decemberpress.com/bumblehive/>

First Comment - As soon as I decided to morph Sticky Note into BumbleHive, I got my first comment on Sticky Note. It was from a blogger in the UK, also a beekeeper. It was validating, but made me realize the wisdom of keeping the windows papered over until the site is more substantial.

Posts - One of the posts I'm researching is local beekeeping regulations. In the process of this research, I read through my neighborhood indenture. Although it was written when the neighborhood was incorporated 100 years ago, it is the document the trustees have always used, then and now. It has a clause with racist language in it, prohibiting non-whites from buying property. I realize this is not enforced, and unenforceable, but wrote my trustees nonetheless to ask about redacting it, after looking into what other neighborhoods saddled with the same wording have done. This opened up a pandora's box of email exchanges and phone calls, which I enjoyed from a reporting perspective, but took more time than the future post probably warrants. (Then again, it will likely be more relevant to readers than what I made my kids for breakfast.)

Professional Development - I watched these Ted Talks and read through these articles

about entrepreneurial journalism. I found Lisa Williams content about embracing code meaningful. A dragon I will continue to slay. <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/mediawire/175836/live-blogging-tedx-talks-with-david-carr-ben-smith-lisa-williams-more/>

Work Issue

Pace! Setting up this blog is such plodding work. I'll spend 1/2 hour just trying to line up text in the right spot by a photo, or adding a margin around it. I think these adjustments should take me just a few minutes here and there, but until I climb the design learning curve, they are huge time sucks. When I can't figure something out, I search within WordPress first, then do a greater search through Google to find the answers. Often I find myself going down a rabbit hole and coming out the other end with a head full of interesting blog publishing ideas, but no specific answer to my original questions. So it's more trial and error. Plod, plod.

Research

Both bloggers I contacted last week responded and agreed to be interviewed. I'm in the back-and-forth process of setting up a time next week with Anita Blanchard (This That and the Mother Thing.) Kimberly Voss (Women's Pages History) requested my interview questions emailed to her, which I did. She hasn't sent them back yet, so I'll follow-up with her next week. I also contacted a blogger named Stephanie Sprenger who writes a blog called Mommy, For Real. I read a post she wrote about using social media to introduce herself and her blog to potential readers. It was a charming autobiographical essay about

how awkward, but rewarding, she found the process. <http://www.blogger.com/awkward-blogger> I asked her if I could interview her, since she has clearly thought hard about and experienced the challenges of finding an audience. She agreed and we're fixing a time for next week.

Goals for Next Week

I want to get to the point where I can go live with BumbleHive, which means adding content and smoothing the design. I am looking forward to interviewing the bloggers I've contacted for my research, as well as reaching out to another one or two.

My son played my keyboard like a piano last night and afterward a number of my files disappeared from their regular locales and are somewhere in the hinterlands of my computer. Guess how I'm spending my Saturday?

Have a nice MLK weekend,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 3

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com> Jan 25

to John, Mary, Jacqui, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

I don't consider this week's work yet done. I had a sick child at home for a day and a bit, so I've made plans to break away this weekend for some long stretches of time, which my gracious husband has obliged, mostly because I promised I'd stock up on his favorite Belgian ale and Cadbury's chocolate.

Weekly Project Highlights

The site - I worked this week again on the "infrastructure" of the site. WordPress.org has a lot of features that I know I will learn over time, just by trial and error, but I'm impatient and slow and eager to get the site presentable. So I contacted one of my students who started a blog last year, Cards Blog, with a customized WordPress.org site. I knew he'd be totally honest about how steep his learning curve was, and how he climbed it. He told me he hired his high school buddy to do all the site design and programming. "He dumbed it down for me, so all I have to do is post content using the idiot-proof dashboard he designed." Ah well, nice try. I found a WordPress St. Louis Meet Up group that holds meetings a few times a month. They had one last week that conflicted with my monthly beekeeping club meeting, so I couldn't attend, but I did contact some of the members via the site and asked them some questions that were troubling me. I'll start going to their meetings schedule permitting.

One of my ongoing issues is photo display. Many of the WP users I spoke with encouraged me to use publicly available photos because I can get nice, high resolution images and adjust them to display quickly (which I can do with my own images, but they're not as abundant or interesting. Yet.) So I trolled Fotopedia, Pixabay, Flickr and other databases and started adding to my media library in WP. I brushed up on Creative Commons Licensing and attribution. I wrote to the national Honey Board to get permission to use some of their wonderful images. They obliged and linked me to the subset they'll permit for redistribution on a blog.

Posts - In addition to posting on the site this week, I read through other bloggers "best posts/most popular posts" to see what grabs readers. Personal stories; humor; universal emotion seem to top the list based on my scanned reads. I found a post about the subject itself interesting. (Seven lessons learned in seven years of blogging.)

Social Media - I activated my twitter site, (@SuzanneLanglois) and started following some people. I really don't do social media well at all. I didn't realize I was posting my cell phone number all over Facebook this week during my correspondence with the blogger I was interviewing until my college friend in Buffalo NY alerted me to my bumbling ways.

Professional Development - I am spending more time on the blog set-up still and less time on writing well-crafted posts that my heart desires. So I was thrilled to pick up a *New Yorker* from the top of my growing to-read stack and find a detailed essay by John McPhee on structure in writing. I was inspired and invigorated. For my dose of

professional development this week, I went online and read through all his essays I could find on the subject of writing (mostly from the New Yorker and the Paris Review.)

Work Issue

I noticed some of the stronger blog posts out there link constantly throughout their posts. The links are relevant and broad - to a photo, a wikipedia entry, another post, a website, a video, whatever. Linking really exploits the power of the blog publishing platform. So I added links to one of my posts this week, but when you click on the links, you loose my site entirely. Another programming bug to work out.

Research

I had a phone interview with a blogger named Stephanie Sprenger (her blog is Mommy, For Real.) It was eye-opening. One of the themes she really drove home to me was that blog audience is composed primarily of other bloggers, who read each others' blogs as a mutual favor. (She's speaking of the "mommy blog" genre, not necessarily all blogs in general.) She also emphasized the fact that social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter for her) are at the heart of her success gaining readers. As a journalist, I was depressed after talking with her. As a master's student researching audience, I found the info scintillating.

Goals for Next Week

Same as last week - I want to get to the point where I can go live with BumbleHive. I made an outline and starting writing text for the "pages" (as opposed to posts) that I want to put on the site. I'd like each page to have its own photo, in addition to its own subject

(for example, health facts about honey; why be a beekeeper, About me, etc.) which I'd like to get up on the site to flesh out its skeleton. I'll contact more interviewees too.

Apologies for the late missive,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 4

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Feb 1

to Jacqui, John, Mary, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

On your sage advice, I got programming assistance this week, and finally made decent progress on my blog.

Weekly Project Highlights

Outsourcing - I searched on elance.com and guru.com for programmers. There are plenty of people out there advertising their WordPress services, from St. Louis to Bangalore. I contacted a few, and realized most of them wanted to either build an entire customized site; or write blog posts for an existing site. I was looking for someone to walk me through my list of trouble spots, and get paid by the hour for their help. I called my friend Howard, who helped me two weeks ago get started on WordPress.org. I asked his advice on outsourcing help, and he said he was teaching himself how to be one of these WordPress experts. He does general web design, and apparently his clients often ask him to create blogs for their site. He said he'd be happy to do some help-by-the-hour with me. *Sold!* He's still learning himself, so he's refusing to write me an invoice, but I'm insisting because he knows 500 times more than I do, and I like the liberty that the economic transaction of being a client provides.

The site - With Howard's assistance, I added a menu of Pages (Bees, Honey, Beekeeping, About) to the site, and made the blog itself one of the Pages. It makes the site more

user-friendly, and better looking, and more structured. We did all kinds of customizations, from installing a typewriter font I was set on using for featured text, to photoshopping images to serve as header photos. He also taught me how to iron out the little troubles I was having with links and photo display. I think it's starting to look substantial, finally. (Click on the words in the top right corner to see what I'm talking about <http://decemberpress.com/bumblehive/>)

Posts - I wrote a couple of posts but won't put them on the site until this weekend, because I'd like to edit them a bit, and just ran out of time. But I will add at least two, after my Pinewood Derby duties are over.

Professional Development - I signed up for a free online series of 7 WordPress video tutorials, at Howard's suggestion. I only watched the first one so far, and it was very well done - clear and targeted for people like me who want to blog and troubleshoot the basics of their site, without delving deep into coding. <http://www.thewpclassroom.com>

I wish I had taken these tutorials three weeks ago!

Work Issue

Now that I know how to tweak the site, I keep wanting to do more tweaking of the design and features before going live. It's my latent OCD. I'm giving myself a couple more days, then I'm going to launch it.

Research

I got interview answers back from Kimberly Voss, a blogger I contacted for an interview 2 weeks ago. (She had requested I email her questions.) Her answers gave me a good historical perspective on blog audience. I contacted Alise Wright, another blogger, requesting an interview.

Goals for Next Week

On the blog end: continue adding content, particularly relevant posts; learn and do a "link within"; add features, first and foremost a blog roll. On the research side: subscribe to blogs written by bloggers I'd like to interview. It might increase my chances for responses to my requests for interviews. I'm also planning on contacting more than my typical 1-2, to kick up the pace of my research.

Enjoy the Superbowl, if you're fans, or the party accoutrement if you're not,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 5

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Feb 8

to John, Jacqui, Mary, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

This week I finally took the blog live.

Weekly Project Highlights

Went live - I can't say the process was glitch-free, but the blog finally went public this week. I had another unplanned crash course in programming in the process. I couldn't figure out why I wasn't able to access my site to make changes Tuesday so I called Howard in a panic. He figured out the problems. I still don't really know what I did wrong. He tried very hard to speak slowly and explain it all to me, but he lost me with "You're using Yoko parent, with a Yoko child stylesheet and your child theme broke."

Someday, I might understand that sentence. In the meantime, I'm happy that he transitioned BumbleHive from the decemberpress portal it was hiding in to a searchable URL (<http://bumblehive.com>).

The site - I added a blogroll, which I'll expand over time. Howard taught me how to install a nifty Plugin called a favicon that puts a logo or some other tiny graphic of choice next to the blog name. It automatically comes up to the left of the address.

Posts - Now that I finally know how to get photos to display properly with wrapping text, I look forward to experimenting around with different post formats. This week, I tried out a photo collage at the end of a post, which was shockingly easy.

Blog reading - I had hours of time this week when my blog was down during the transition and server updating. So I sought out blogs I hadn't read before in the Mommy Blog genre to see if I could pin-point what attracted readers to some more than others. I didn't come up with a good answer to that question. Writing quality, clean design, strong voice - the things I look for in a good blog - varied dramatically from blog to blog. I did, however, have a eureka moment during this blog prow: It's a very crowded field, and the best blogs have something special that differentiates them from the masses. This something special is typically a narrow perspective, a niche that distinguishes them from the other Mom missives (Russian immigrant homesteader; Christian British ex-pat philosopher; parenting off the grid.)

Professional Development - Inspired by my hours of reading blog after undistinguishable blog, I read Seth Godin's book, *The Purple Cow*. It's about the importance of standing out in a crowded industry; by identifying your niche; by being distinctive.

Work Issue

I realize that to differentiate my blog from all the ones out there, I must keep it tightly themed to beekeeping. So I decided that I will henceforth reference bees, honey or beekeeping in all my posts in order to keep my blog relevant in my chosen niche. I think it will make for a stronger, tighter, more distinctive blog over time. That said, I don't want the blog to become a technical reference. I still want it to be focused on storytelling. I think the way I referenced beekeeping in my post this week about the Pinewood Derby was rather forced. I'll work on making the references integrate more organically.

Research

Blogger Alise Wright agreed to an interview, and requested email questions rather than a phone call, which I sent her. I will follow-up with her next week. I also finally interviewed Anita Blanchard (This, That and the Mother Thing blog author, as well as an academic who has written articles about bloggers.) by phone. She was a trip, and full of interesting info.

Goals for Next Week

Now that the blog is public, I need to find people interested in reading it, while still spiffing and posting. I'll look for a Plug-In to put on the site that helps with search-engine optimization, and work on key words and phrases. I'd also like to establish a Hoot Suite and Google Analytics account (although I've read many bloggers using WordPress.org find the WP analytics more than sufficient; might do a bit more research on this front) and learn how to use them.

Have a great weekend!

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 6

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Feb 15

to John, Joy, Mary, Jacqui

Dear Committee Members,

Finally feel like I've caught my stride with the blog this week. <http://bumblehive.com/>

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - I added a Page called Videos where I'll post beekeeping-related videos. I installed a plug-in for a site map, and a plug-in that ensures that any links I put on the site will be opened by the reader in a new window -- so my site stays on their screen. I learned how to do a few more trouble-shooting related site tasks, notably fixing things like "broken images." I'm happily feeling like the design and site infrastructure are decent enough that I can spend more time on content, thus this week I lingered over my writing and my stories some.

SEO - I followed the advice and instructions that my WordPress video tutorials and Howard have relayed on how to increase the chance of being found via search engine optimization. I added a Meta Description Tag (key word-laden phrase that describes the site when it's pulled up in an internet search.) I installed a plug-in that acts as an SEO tool, prompting me to enter keywords into each post. Howard taught me how to see what keywords other sites use to give me ideas on what works. (I was surprised to learn it's a common strategy to enter commonly misspelled words.)

Analytics - I opened a Google Analytics account, after looking at how much, and how, Google captures information compared to WordPress.

Blog reading - I subscribed to a large subset of Babble's "Best Mom Blogs of 2012" in order to participate and observe how they engage readers. I also followed a very interesting comment chain on a blog called "Parenting and Stuff" that dealt with how readers came to find and read this particular blog.

Professional Development - I researched use of children's images on blogs.

I had some great photos of Daisies looking at honeycomb that I was planning on using for one of my posts. I called their moms to see if they would be ok if I posted pictures of their girls on my site. The ones I reached said sure, no problem. I have been casually asking my friends how they feel about images of their kids on the internet, and while a few are aghast at the idea, most are laid-back about it because it's inevitable in the age of Facebook. I decided to read up on what the collective parameters are, if any, in the blogosphere. After reading these links http://idiotsguides.com/static/quickguides/computertechnology/blogging_rules_and_etiquette.html; <http://www.blogger.com/i-shouldve-been-food-blogger>; <http://www.blogger.com/copyrights-watermarks-and-internet-creepy-crawlies?page=0,1> I opted to avoid using children's faces -- perhaps even my own kids -- altogether. It seems like a possible risk that can be strategically avoided with a bit of planning while taking photos.

Work Issue

After doing all the search engine optimizing tasks this week, I googled "Suzanne Langlois blog." I pulled up a blog about a serial cocktail lounge act, and one written by a Christian quilter who goes by the pen name of Stitchmama. I think I need to continue with seo work.

Research

I sent out a request for interview to a blogger who is also an editor at BlogHer, Melissa Ford. She agreed, which thrills me because she blogs about both parenting and about blogging/social media topics.

Goals for Next Week

Work on getting readers. Add social-media buttons for readers to click, and a way for them to subscribe to the blog via email. Continue to read, subscribe to, and participate in other blogs.

Happy President's Day! (At my neices' and nephew's fancy school in Santa Monica, next week is called "ski week." It cracks me up that skiing trumps the presidents.)

- Suzanne

Field Notes Week 7

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Feb 22

to John, Jacqui, Mary, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

Hope you like snow. I think Columbia got hit worse than St. Louis, and we got a wollup.

Beautiful, if inconvenient.

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - I subscribed to a Google-owned company called Feedburner, which enables me to put a form on my site that lets readers subscribe to the blog by email. I installed a plug-in that automatically backs up the site every week, then sends me an email back up; as well as one that automatically updates the URLs in the site. I continue to do boring but important site infrastructure stuff like this as I put the lessons I learn from Matt Wolfe's WordPress Classroom tutorials to use. I balance the tedium of site work with the thrill of posting, which I am truly enjoying. <http://bumblehive.com/>

Audience building - I noticed that my feeble former site (the original Sticky Notes site, on wordpress.com, which I abandoned after week 2) is getting readers here and there, despite the fact that I don't post to it. I shut it down so I don't derail any potential readers on my good site, but I couldn't help but wonder why I'm not getting any readers simply by chance on BumbleHive. Plus, it's been a week now since I installed all the search engine optimization information and keywords, which I continue to add to.

I looked through all my settings to try to troubleshoot the issue. I contacted Howard and he worked with me for an afternoon on the problem. He not only noticed that I had one setting in place which discouraged search engines from indexing my site. (I undid that right away). He also walked me through installing Google Webmaster Tools, which, as he explained, "will let you get crawled by Goggle now." Sounds like a crime involving parasites, but he knows what he's doing. He said it will take about a week to 10 days for the changes to take effect.

I started making a Facebook page for BumbleHive, because after scanning social media buttons on popular/successful blogs, I realized most all of them link to social media dedicated to the blog site, rather than the author's individual social media account.

Analytics - Thrilled to see on my Google Analytics account that one of the bloggers I started following visited my site.

Professional Development - I want to love social media. I want it to turn from the cold prickly that it is for me into a nice warm fuzzy. So I watched Johanna Blakley extoll its virtues in eliminating gender stereotypes in traditional media and marketing; and in connecting people through shared interests rather than through old school demographic garbage like age, income and sex. http://www.ted.com/talks/johanna_blakley_social_media_and_the_end_of_gender.html. Also, while dodging the adults who were bothering the heck out of me during the snow days, (see Work Issue, below) I watched these two Ted talks, http://www.ted.com/playlists/60/work_smarter.html Nigel Marsh on How to Make Work-Life Balance Work and Jason

Fried on Why Work Doesn't Happen at Work. Then I put a note on my front door:

If your kids need something to do, they can find my kids sledding on the hill two blocks away. Extra sleds in the garage.

Work Issue

A national holiday Monday and snow days Thursday and Friday gave me a double-whammy (triple-whammy?) of unexpected working-at-home challenges. I've gotten into a good groove working at home without interruption during my kids' school day. But these three days were tough. My kids weren't the problem, actually. (We have a nice understanding - they can do anything they want at all, as long as it doesn't involve a video screen of any sort. They know they can get me if there's a problem, but they really love the freedom and find all kinds of things to do.) It was the neighbors and other moms - texting, calling, showing up at the door - trying to loop me into logistical arrangements that involved activities for their bored kids. I ignored them as much as I could. But when there is a neighbor standing in your kitchen calling your name, it's hard to hide out in your basement office too long. *L'enfer, c'est les autres!*

Research

I'm reaching for the more popular bloggers to interview now. I anticipate a fair amount of pestering will be needed to get a response. I reached out to Hannah Mudge (We Mixed Our Drinks); Kristine Cook (Wait in the Van and We Mixed Our Drinks) and Shannon Hayes (Radical Homemaking and Grassfed Gourmet). Shannon was the only one to

respond this week, and graciously answered all my questions and then some. She's been blogging for a long time, and had very interesting responses.

Goals for Next Week

Kick up my participation on other bloggers site, in an effort to get readers; finish the BumbleHive facebook page, and plug it into the site; revisit seo tactics and troubleshooting; rethink my blog Categories (which I took away from the home page this week.)

Looking forward to getting those moms outta' my hair next week!

Until then,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 8

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Mar 1

to John, Mary, Jacqui, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

Finally getting some readers, so certainly my most rewarding week yet.

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - <http://bumblehive.com/> I tried this week to tie my posts in a small way to topical news, which I enjoyed as a once-and-future journalist. I also continued the piddly little tweaks to the site to make it perform better for the reader (adjusting image sizes to load faster, adding descriptions to photos, etc.) I added social media link buttons on the home page as well as after each post.

Audience building - I finished the BumbleHive facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/BumbleHiveBlog>. Via this facebook page, I sent a link to my blog to an inner circle of friends, and many of them read the blog. But the most thrilling part came when a handful of women I don't know emailed my sister-in-law to thank her for linking them to the blog, which they read and enjoyed. Very confirming audience feedback. Now, I wish they'd leave comments on the site, rather than in my sister-in-law's Inbox, but I'll take what I can get. Also tweeted a link to one of my posts. This felt really weird, but generated two new readers.

Analytics - I seem to still be missing a step in using search engine optimization tools. My seo reports in my Google Analytics account indicate that I haven't enabled my Webmaster

Tools (although I thought I had.) I'll work on this issue, because I am eager to see if the keywords, etc. I'm using in my posts are grabbing readers.

Professional Development - Now that I am getting readers, I want to better understand how they came to my blog, which requires a deeper understanding of analytics. So I re-read two articles Joy Mayer gave me in December (they made much more sense this time around) on analytics tools for journalists. I also watched this detailed but plainspoken You Tube video on understanding Google Analytics: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6QXNhsUKLo>. And I took a class on social media distributed by the Washington University School of Business. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=truY5Vm6pHc&list=PLaQWYmxTtvSmhUQ08XBCppQ7oacQaDhbp&index=5>)

While the e-class itself was only mildly helpful, it did inspire me to connect with Amanda Zaydman, one of the panelists, because I think she could be a good local resource (I'm vaguely thinking of hiring her for a few hours as a consultant/teacher for social media marketing of the blog?) I saw her present a hilarious elevator pitch last fall on her anti-Todd Akin campaign, *Illegitimate Whistle*. (<http://illegitimatewhistle.com/about-2/>)

Work Issue

I feel like a snowed-in troll scrivener. My eyes are dry and burning by the end of the day, because I've never spent so much consecutive time in front of a computer. I turned down the heat in my house to alleviate some of the dryness, so I walk around in a ski cap and jacket. By the evening, I'm jumping up and down to warm up (without my coat on, lest my family think I'm leaving them) and talking madly about anything, since I've been

alone, silent, and fairly immobile all day. Maybe I need to shake up my routine and work in the presence of others, like at a coffeehouse or something, next week. At least I'd be able to talk to the people who wipe the tables. Panera is nice to the homeless, so they should tolerate me.

Research

Pestered the marquee bloggers I contacted last week, and contacted two more: Rita Arens (Surrender Dorothy) and Alexandra Rosas (Good Day Regular People.) Both were named in Babble's top 100 Mom Bloggers of 2012.

Goals for Next Week

Troubleshoot my Google Webmaster tools issue(s); get more aggressive finding readers with word of mouth and social media; pester bloggers I've requested interviews with.

Happy March!

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 9

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Mar 8

to John, Jacqui, Mary, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

I got my first posted comment, which I'd been expecting for a couple of weeks now, since it was from Howard, my friend and programming consultant. But it was still great because now I know my whole comments/approval/reply system works.

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - I didn't do much successful site infrastructure work this week, but I did try and fail at many programming and plug-in fixes to the images I'm posting. (details below, under Work Issue) I wrote two posts, and deliberately chose the subject of my first one (<http://bumblehive.com/this-or-a-life-of-street-crime/>) to be something I could literally peddle around to neighbors and friends as a topic they'd be interested in reading. This made me feel vaguely like the Tupperware Lady.

Audience building - I read and posted comments on other bloggers' sites, to shamelessly take advantage of the opportunity to drop a link to my blog. Tweeted and posted to BumbleHive Facebook page a link to a bee-caffeine article. Continued to email acquaintances a link to my blog, with a personal note as to why I think they might enjoy reading it. Totally awkward, skin-crawling task.

Analytics - I fixed the glitch in my Webmaster Tools, so my Google Analytics reports are now working (and strangely addictive.) I opened up a HootSuite account, following

advice Joy gave me in December, which I now understand why she gave: It really simplifies social media tracking. I barely use social media now, but this lowers the intimidation threshold a lot because it so nicely categorizes everything chronologically, and makes issuing missives much simpler across platforms.

Professional Development - The Eureka moment of my week came when I re-read sections of Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*. I first read this book over a decade ago -- it came out in 2000 -- and remember being fascinated by the way Gladwell describes the spread of ideas. (The basic gist of his thesis is that ideas, behaviors, new products, assumptions, anything really, can spread through a population like a disease does, given the right circumstances. He uses a paradigm from epidemiology on the spread of epidemics to structure his examples.) Anyway, I've had his ideas kind of rolling around in the back of my brain and kept thinking about them as I force myself to use social media to get readers. Then it dawned on me: there was no social media in 2000. Facebook started in 2004, Twitter in 2006, Pinterest, Instagram, and the others even later. So I poured over the sections where he describes how ideas go from the originator to many many people very quickly, and fixated on his awesome description of the phenomenon of word-of-mouth. This has inspired me to identify a few people I know who are likely to enjoy reading my blog *and* who are likely to mention it/link it to others effectively because of their personality, acquaintance network, or their own social media use. In Gladwell language, I need to find some *Connectors* and *Mavens*.

Work Issue

I'd like to improve the quality of photos on my site. I've spent a lot of time playing around with re-sizing, cropping and the other limited photo editing capabilities I have on WordPress and on my IPhoto software, but I still can't get heads and feet, for example, to appear in the published frame. I have thrown my questions out there on WordPress forums and to experienced web types like Howard and I keep getting answers that indicate I need to buy and learn image editing software (such as PhotoShop or Fireworks.)

Research

I was thrilled to get Rita Arens to respond to my interview questions. She has been named a Top Parent Blogger two years running for her blog (Surrender Dorothy), and is the Senior Editor at BlogHer. Super helpful writer. I also had another marquee blogger, Alexandra Rosas (Good Day Regular People) agree to be interviewed. Still have to chase her down to arrange it.

Goals for Next Week

Investigate photo imaging software, or, hopefully, simpler solutions to my photo issues; identify Connectors and Mavens to help me attract readers; put out new research interview queries.

Have a great weekend!

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 10

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Mar 15

to John, Joy, Mary, Jacqui

Dear Committee Members,

As much as I hated the gloomy un-spring-like weather this week, until today, it sure made staying inside my warm basement office easy. Can't figure out where the week went...

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - I again chose one of my post topics to be as spreadable as possible among my desired audience(<http://bumblehive.com/the-perpetual-quest-for-discovery/>). I emailed links to it with a personal note to a couple of friends, and used HootSuite to spread it as well.

I had a snag with my Feedburner (email sign-up system on the blog) and spent too much time trying to fix it. But I think I did.

Audience building - Hit the pavement hard looking for readers using Gladwellian word-of-mouth. I chatted with as many people as I could at my monthly beekeepers association meeting Wednesday night, hoping I'd hit a few Connectors and Mavens in the process. I don't know the members terribly well, being a new member myself. But I tried to identify women, mostly, who might be potentially interested, and gave them a business card I made up with the site address, contact and social info. The most interesting people at the meeting are the rural beekeepers, many of them 70+ year-old farmers, or Amish. Not exactly my target audience.

On the other hand, I mined my personal contacts and realized my own sister is a bit of a gadfly when it comes to sharing information among my target audience. I'm so accustomed to ignoring her, I never realized she's a Connector right in my midst. She linked my blog on her FB page, along with a nice personal intro. Definitely owe her one. Also identified a woman, former tv journalist Jill Farmer, who has a huge network of followers for her consulting business, dealing with subjects pertinent to my target audience. I did some appropriate social media engagement on her various sites, with the goal of establishing authentic contact with her before using her as a brick in my marketing road.

Post-Dispatch columnist Bill McClellan wrote a column this week with the same theme, coincidentally, as my post last week about parents' controlling kids schedules. I tried to leverage this with a Tweet, which generated some feedback from a few new readers.

Photos - After more web-based photo and blog development research, I concluded I do need to purchase and learn photo editing software. I ordered Photoshop Elements, which I should receive next week.

Professional Development - I opened a HootSuite account last week, and learned how to use much of the platform's features this week. They have a great video tutorial series (HootSuite University) which explains not only the mechanics of the system, but also a decent dose of marketing strategy. A few of the technical details were way over my head, but for now I don't think it's important that I understand a sentence like: *When you shrink a link, you might notice you have a choice between two endings. The only difference is that one is an Olivia domain, the other is a Lichtenstein.*

Work Issue

The HootSuite and WordPress tutorials persuaded me to upload some "gravatars" to my media accounts. So I slipped a disc into my computer containing some professional head shots I won at my son's school auction. The photographer had slapped her personal propaganda stickers all over the front of the cd, which gummed up the works in my laptop and got entirely stuck. You get what you pay for. The unflappable guys Mac Headquarters pried it out without any (known) damage to my computer. (The disc is toast, but good riddance to vanity.)

Research

I interviewed a former blogger and acquaintance, Stephanie Richter, who was the first person I ever knew to read blogs for news and information. She's a great writer, in the neo-Southern Gothic tradition, but took a hiatus from her blog (Mayonnaise Sandwich.) I hadn't had contact with her for years, and was intrigued to discover how her perspectives on blog audience has evolved over time. Alexandra Rosas (Good Day Regular People) answered my interview questions by email. She also turned me onto a post she's written about blog audience building.

Goals for Next Week

I have overlooked a local journalist blogger, Aisha Sultan of the Post-Dispatch, who writes and blogs about, among other topics, parenting and blogging. I would like to secure an interview with her. Also: learn photo editing; continue luring readers.

Happy St. Patrick's Day,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 11

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Mar 21

To: Fennell, John, Joy Mayer, Blakely, Mary Kay, Banaszynski, Jacqui

Dear Committee Members,

Trying to tighten my theming to beekeeping, as the bee season is about to start.

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - I'm working on re-doing my blogroll, looking for links more relevant to the themes I've been writing about. Quite a few of the bloggers I'm interviewing tell me blogrolls used to be a way to attract readers, but really aren't anymore. When I look at well-designed niche sites, blogrolls more often serve as theme-based reference links. I took it down from my home page while I tighten it up.

Identified another Connector in a remote social circle, who now has her own PR firm. (We both served on a pto together when our kids were in pre-school a decade ago.)

I remember her telling me she jogs just to see how many people she knows well enough to greet by name. So I emailed her a link to a post this week. (<http://bumblehive.com/honey-bees-have-a-great-sense-of-time-me-not-so-much/>) Every spritz helps.

I finally figured out the problem I've been having with my Feedburner (email sign-up system on the blog.) A fair number of friend/family/acquaintance readers told me they signed up to receive posts by email, but never get any. I went to Feedburner forums to try to troubleshoot the issue last week, and got enough conflicting info that I wound up just opening up a whole new account. I realized this week that the problem has been operator

error all along. (The readers aren't hitting the "submit" button, for example.) I should probably look into another form of direct updating.

Audience building - Aisha Sultan (see Research, below) is the most recent person to tell me Twitter is crucial to blog audience building. She's also the most recent person to make me realize I need to tweet more that just links to my posts. She inspired me to pick a few themes related to my blog - parenting, beekeeping, bee biology, science - and re-tweet links to topical news stories dealing with these themes. I'll get more deliberative and persistent with Twitter.

Professional Development - Started learning Photoshop. A photographer friend gave me a book on Photoshop, written by Katrin Eismann. She writes with the eye of a photojournalist and storyteller, and I am learning a lot not only about the software, but also photography in general -- how to use photos to enhance and tell the story. I tracked down Eismann's series of online articles on the subject, many of which are helping me better understand the power of images in attracting and holding audience's attention.

<http://www.photoshopdiva.com/articles.html>

Work Issue

HootSuite has a neat feature, called keyword streaming, that scans the whole universe of Twitter feed for you on any subject of your choosing. I set up streams for bees, honey, beekeeping, bee biology, backyard beekeeping, etc. and scanned the abundance of tweets these customized filters sent my way. I was convinced I'd stumble on interesting news articles and other information worth sharing. After wasting hours looking for relevant,

newsworthy items to retweet, I came to the conclusion that 95% of the stream is total garbage -- lot of it X-rated. There is very little on Twitter worth reading. I'm much better off "following" intelligent people and organizations directly. I regret it took me hours to figure this out.

Research

Aisha Sultan of the Post-Dispatch was very generous with her time, and we had a long phone interview as she was driving to Florida. (Bless those boring stretches of highway.) She talked to me about her experience building up an audience for the Post's parenting blog, as well as the many differences between blog readers and print readers. Great interview.

Goals for Next Week

Tweet with purpose. Re-build blogroll. Work on shorter posts -- the more blogs I read, the more I think short, snappy writing makes the best content. Start consolidating my research interview data.

Have a great weekend,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 12

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Mar 29

to John, Jacqui, Mary, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

No problem Tweeting With Purpose this week, as honey bees made the news more than once.

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - My primary goal this week was to write more succinctly.

The *intended* subject for one of my posts was my experience building hive boxes -- which required a lot of carpentry skills I don't have--and my ensuing decision to outsource this task and the economic question that ensued. In my writing outline, I structured the post around a housekeeping analogy. Despite a lot of re-writing, I couldn't incorporate all the ideas I had intended into one post, simply due to length constraints I imposed on myself. So I re-crafted the post <http://bumblehive.com/how-i-value-my-time/> and will write about hive building next week, with a different approach. I'm getting tougher with my hatchet.

Audience building - I enjoyed an online Odyssey this week in an attempt to connect with three local mom bloggers whom Aisha Sultan mentioned to me during our interview last week. Aisha had profiled these mom bloggers when she first started the Post-Dispatch parenting blog a few years ago. Two of them are former print journalists. Today, one of them still maintains her own blog (it's depressing schlock) one of them blogs for a

baby-centered blog (more consumerism than journalism going on there) and one of them is nowhere to be found in the blogosphere. My search eventually lead me to an exciting-sounding site called The St. Louis Bloggers Guild. But, turns out, it's defunct; domain name has been taken over by a Japanese company. <http://stlouisbloggersguild.org/>.

On a more productive note, I am a member of a small women`s discussion group that meets monthly do discuss --under a *nothing leaves this room* condition-- topics weighing heavily on our collective minds. The topic for April is "How to maintain a creative edge through projects such as writing." I plan to drop my blog url shamelessly.

Professional Development - In my quest to write succinctly, with impact, I looked for guidance by reading *Microstyle, The Art of Writing Little*, by Christopher Johnson. I was skeptical that the book would be much more than how to write catchy Tweets, but it turned out to be an enlightening read full of great examples and practical training on how to write with "expressive economy." Johnson makes the argument that practitioners in all forms of mass media have always had to compete for readers as they disseminate words with the goal of having their message passed on to a wider audience. Johnson shows how literary journalists like Dorothy Parker and Earnest Hemingway were brilliant microstylists. Writers like these inspire brevity more than any Tweeter ever could.

Work Issue

I am truly struggling with writing shorter posts. Maybe I read too much about Nik D'Aloisio, the kid who invented the Summly app that condenses long-form journalism into short pieces suitable for mobile device reading. Now I am haunted by the notion that

readers dismiss stories with a flip "tl:dr" (too long, didn't read). I chopped, edited, re-wrote, re-thought and revised my posts this week to make them as short as possible, while still maintaining the narrative story line, and the humor. While I didn't come close to my goal of 3 paragraphs max, I did keep my word count lower than all previous weeks. I'll continue to work for improvement on this goal. Reading *Microstyle* clued me into techniques I am eager to practice.

Research

I read a little blip in the New York Times last week about Jonah Berger's (Wharton School, U of Penn.) research on audience building in online media. So I looked him up and read through some of his papers. <https://marketing.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/311/research>. I focused on his research regarding media audience and content sharing. He's taking the same concept of idea contagion that Malcom Gladwell and Seth Godin have popularized, and doing both academic research and popular writing about them. What struck me the most, for my own selfish audience building purposes, is that readers share stories for many reasons, but two frequent reasons are objectives I have in my blog post writing: humorous content and scientific content.

Goals for Next Week

Write microstylistically. Continue to re-build blogroll, and put it back onto the site. Make sense of my research interviews, continue with transcribing and analyzing them.

Hope your weekend brings some jelly beans,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 13

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Apr 5

to John, Jacqui, Joy, Mary

Dear Committee Members,

I'll be sending everyone some proposed dates for a defense soon. In the meantime, I'm still learning a lot, engrossed in the daily life of a blogger.

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - I posted a couple of timely photos, and wrote one brief post this week, following guidelines I took from the *MicroStyle* book. It was as satisfying as eating an egg white omelette. So my last post this week was beefier, and more to my taste. I know it's good for me, so I'll keep up with the leaner posts, but it'll take some time to change my ways and still maintain my voice.

Audience building - I emailed a blogger whom I linked to in a post this week, which generated a new reader who actually left a comment. Ironically, I had been contemplating a re-think of the location of my comment section in the future. I get new comments everyday, and they're all spam, which is to be expected with the blog platform. I simply report them to WordPress and move on. But I've still been holding out hope for more reader comments. I looked through some established websites in this genre trying to figure out the who's and why's of commenting, and I realized that comment sections aren't the norm. (Do all blog writers fear the blank comment box?) Some sites have 1 master comment section on the "About" page, for example, rather than a comment

prompt after each post. Right now, I'm still too new to discourage any reader participation, so I'll hang tight with the obvious comment location.

Professional Development - Ever since I started blogging, I find I am constantly jotting down little notes to myself -- things I hear people say, observations, ideas that pop into my brain -- that I know will somehow make it into a future blog post. I even covered my kitchen table in butcher paper so I can just write directly on it, instead of on whatever scrap of pulp is lying about. My attempts at putting some organization to these thoughts -- for example storing them in a proper file on my laptop -- have failed. The ideas deflate under the force of structure. By contrast, when I pull a gum wrapper out of my pocket and read, "sword b per pound why calculate" I know exactly the post I envisioned at the moment the thought went from my mind to the gum wrapper.

As I thought about my scrappy notations, I recalled reading Maria Popova's* great post about how Joan Didion's essay "On Keeping a Notebook," is relevant today, for writers on blog and social media platforms (<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/11/19/joan-didion-on-keeping-a-notebook/>.) I found Popova's analysis so discerning that I checked out Didion's 1968 book *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* so I could read the entire essay. As I soaked in Didion's eloquent wisdom I was aware that, as a practitioner of New Journalism (new in the 1960s and 70s) she communicated facts through narrative storytelling and literary techniques. And blogging is -- arguably, optimistically, messily -- a form of neo-New Journalism. I was also moved to put a few notebooks around my life, in the purse, car, bedroom.

(*Maria Popova writes Brain Pickings, which she describes as an "interestingness digest." She is, imho, truly worthwhile to follow on Twitter.)

Work Issue

I'm planning on adding more links to my Videos page on the site. My friend/programming consultant, Howard, suggested I use some WordPress Plug-ins (software applications for WordPress sites) to enhance their display. Some Plug-Ins advertise that they'll display your videos in a gallery with accompanying thumbnails; others say they will put a sliding carousel video display on the page; lots of appealing options. I couldn't get a single Plug-in to do what is said it would. Howard offered to help me, and tried installing and troubleshooting 3 or 4, with no success. I tried another half-dozen on my own, to no avail. This is a recurring problem I've had with Plug-Ins. They often don't do what their description promises they'll do, and the so-called instructions offered by the developer are insufficient, unintelligible, or non-existent. One of the more elaborate sounding Plug-Ins offered one single line of instruction: "Edit its data as per required." There's a wide-open market for technical writers to sell services to Plug-In creators.

Research

Followed up with a couple of bloggers I interviewed early-on in my project with minor questions/clarifications. I am realizing, as I review the responses, that I understand now so much better what they are talking about when they discuss audience building than I did in January and February.

Goals for Next Week

Continue to reach out for audience with direct pitches, links and relevant social media lures. Post succinctly, but satisfyingly. Write up research and assemble project elements.

Have a nice weekend,

Suzanne

Field Notes Week 14

Suzanne Langlois <langlois.suzanne@gmail.com>

Apr 12

to John, Mary, Jacqui, Joy

Dear Committee Members,

I'm sad this is the last week of my project, but happy blogs don't die. These 14 weeks have been simultaneously more challenging and more rewarding than I could have imagined.

Thank you, *thank you*, my awesome committee!

Weekly Project Highlights

Site Infrastructure and Blog - Worried my posts would tick off the husband, the nice people at the Missouri Wildflowers nursery, the religious, the carnivores and a Texan this week. So far, only heard back from the husband, who was contrite. (Quite rightly!)

Howard suggested that I run BumbleHive through a free website grader. These are neat little programs that evaluate sites on various dimensions. I used one called freegrader. It checks that the site is linked with social media (good marks for Bumblehive's Facebook fan page); is adaptable, graphically, for mobile devices (yes); and checks 8 features that make it search-engine friendly, such as having a sitemap, image descriptions, etc.

Bumblehive got top marks on all dimensions, except the freegrader detected my site didn't have "Main Headers" (titles on the page that indicate the most important text.) I poured through my post archives and poked around the code on all my pages to investigate. I called on Howard for help, because I still feel like I'm doing open-heart

surgery when I change existing code. He discovered that my post headlines weren't, indeed, coded properly. Once we changed that, Bumblehive's grade jumped from from 69 to 80 (out of 100.) Until the change, search engines weren't detecting the fact that my blog had lots of posts. Now that each headline indicates a distinct post, the site should be favored in searches. My only remaining ding is in a dimension called "Domain Authority," because it's a new site. As freegrader explains, "It takes time to gain importance on the web."

Professional Development - Of the many observations I've made during this project, one I'm certain of is this: Mommy Blogs have become a commodity. The hours I've spent wading through blog after undistinguishable blog have softened my brain. Yet there **are** *many* great bloggers out there, women who distinguish themselves with fabulous content for a niche audience. I returned to Seth Godin this week for professional advice on how to distinguish my blog from the heap. I read his book, "All Marketers are Liars - The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low Trust World." Godin's essential message is that ideas spread through storytelling, because good stories make the world easier to understand. Good stories are honest, short, aggressively original, vivid, precise, different than the stories other people in the same area are telling, and rarely aimed at everyone. I took away a lot of lessons: hone my niche by keeping focused on beekeeping stores; write shorter; identify a smaller audience, post stuff that is remarkable to them, and they will spread the stories. Of course, Godin makes his assertions seem so obviously simple to apply, buttressed with tons of fun anecdotes that prove his wisdom. But if I apply even

a few of his tidbits well, I'll make progress. I heed his warning literally: "Either you are going to tell stories that spread, or you will become irrelevant."

Work Issue

I'm going to miss writing these weekly Field Notes. They have helped me schedule my time, set priorities, and gauge progress. Bloggers mention that they feel an accountability to their readers to continue to post regularly. Although I can appreciate the sentiment, I know my audience is still too small to riot me into action. So, following the advice a couple of the bloggers I interviewed gave me, I'll put myself on a posting and social-media-marketing schedule, to keep up the discipline these Field Notes have provided.

Research

Wrote up the findings on my research question: How do bloggers find readers and build an audience? Sent the draft project report to Professor Fennell for his review.

Goals for Next Week

After I incorporate edits and changes to the draft, I'll send out my Project Report to the whole committee for review. And, of course, I'll keep posting to BumbleHive!

Have a nice weekend,

Suzanne

EVALUATION

My goals for my professional project were to build a site, write regular posts, build up an audience, and continually improve the site. I'll assess each goal individually.

Building the site - I underestimated the importance of knowing some basic programming for successful blog site development. In the beginning of my project, I knew no code. I took some tutorials, and called on my friend and business partner, Howard Lerner, who helped me with WordPress and assisted me with much of the initial and ongoing site development. I also used his site hosting service. Finally, the first week of February -- a month later than I had intended! -- I went live with BumbleHive.com.

Posting - I hoped to spend the bulk of my 30 hours each week drafting compelling content for the site. I thoroughly enjoyed every moment I devoted to planning, writing, editing, re-writing and publishing my posts. I probably spent 10-15 hours each week on posting. While I did post at least twice each week, as planned, I longed to devote more time to this endeavor. I think one of my best choices early on was to find a distinctive niche for my blog. I think I may be the only backyard beekeeping mommy blogger. This is the edge I plan to sharpen over time. For example, I'd like to add more "Pages" onto the site that will help it be a resource for beekeepers. I've been amassing information for an FAQ page; a Recipes page; a Health Facts page. And somewhere on the site, I am going to teach people how to use an EpiPen.

Audience Building - I didn't know how to use social media when I started my project. I also didn't know how important strategic use of Facebook and Twitter were for audience building. When I started the project, I had an anemic personal Facebook page. I had to learn, through reading, following, trial and error, how to use social media. I made a BumbleHive Facebook fan page, opened a Twitter account, and promoted my blog through them both. I'm still learning the intricacies of Twitter. And I still really don't like using Facebook. HootSuite helps exploit them both. And they do help bring readers to the blog. I attracted many readers by emailing friends and asking them to take a look. I identified well-connected people in my social circle, and encouraged them to link my site to their social media accounts. I spent a lot of time each week reading other bloggers, commenting, and hoping they'd visit my site. I think two or three have. My audience building initiatives took about 10-15 hours of time every week. The most boring, annoying, unenjoyable part of my week. Nevertheless, my audience grew.

Continual site improvement - Some weeks, I spent most of my time tweaking an aspect of the blog's design or infrastructure. Again, programming knowledge is crucial to good blog functioning, and my programming skills are weak. I learned as I went, and outsourced what I could to Howard. I spent a fair amount of time each week on what I called "professional development" -- teaching myself what I needed to know to fulfill my weekly goals (programming, social media, creative commons and copywrite law, etc.) or teaching myself what I wanted to know to fulfill my personal goals (improving my writing and my photography.) I think the time I spent pursuing professional development enhanced my skill set as a blogger tremendously.

ABUNDANT PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Please refer to the folder entitled “Media” to view images of my audience building initiatives. Additionally, the Media Folder contains files showing how my blog readership increased over the course of the project, with website metrics from my Google Analytics account.

For a view of the blog in real-time, please go directly to the website: [http://
bumblehive.com/](http://bumblehive.com/)

FINDING READERS IN A CROWDED ROOM

How multi-tasking Mom Bloggers attract audiences inside and outside the parent blogosphere

Remember, the person you love is still in there, and they'd love to share their world with you. Be patient, and understand that the blogosphere they enter is entirely real, and actually does make them happier and more productive in the end. Though, bloggers don't measure "productive" in quite the same way as the rest of the world does, i.e., get to starred posts in Google Reader, check TweetDeck for Mentions, commit to at least five #FF, submit to McSweeney's. Again.

-Alexandra Rosas, *Good Day Regular People*, from her post "When Someone You Love Has a Blog, Part 1"

Alexandra Rosas published her three-part blog post, "When Someone You Love Has A Blog," to explain to husbands and family members the peculiar habits of Mom Bloggers, a subset of online writers who have become famous, collectively, for engaging thousands of readers with their musings on motherhood and domesticity. Mom Bloggers like Ree Drummond, Heather Armstrong and Kelly Oxford have established lucrative

media careers after humble starts writing earnest personal stories for a tiny audience of friends and family. Rosas' witty series hints at the methodical work, above and beyond writing, that Mom Bloggers do to attract a following.

Close to four million women in North America identify as Mommy Bloggers, and about 14 percent of women in the United States read or contribute to these blogs, according to media consumer watchers Nielsen and Arbitron. Women often prefer this personal narrative style of journalism to traditional media. But how exactly the writing moms find the reading moms has remained somewhat of a mystery to the industry and even to the bloggers themselves. To better understand how they connect, I researched the genre, and asked 10 Mom Bloggers, including Rosas, how they attract an audience.

I chose the bloggers I interviewed because they represent a range of blogging experiences - from a blogger who started 10 months ago, to award-winning bloggers who have been writing for nearly a decade. Their blogs are varied as well. Although they all fall within the Mom Blog genre, their tones range from humorous to spiritual, their topics from fertility to sustainable living. Despite their differences, all of these bloggers share a common goal: to get new readers. And there is a distinct consistency to their audience-building strategies. Each of them uses at least five of the following six tactics to attract readers to her blog:

- * reading and commenting on other blogs, with the expectation of reciprocity
- * social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter
- * a consistent voice and personal perspective in her writing

- * frequent posts, at least weekly
- * writing most often about a niche topic
- * submitting posts to online publishing networks and guest posting on established blogs

These strategies can help build an audience from an inner circle to an international following. Every year, the parenting website *Babble* compiles a list of the Top 100 Mom Blogs, selected by a panel of journalists from traditional and online media. The jurors pick the blogs, according to the site, based on their demonstration of “talent.” Neither *Babble* nor the winning bloggers themselves disclose the readership figures of these 100 women’s sites. But industry insider Danielle Wiley has figures. Wiley founded both Sway Group, a talent agency that represents some of the most popular women bloggers, and Massive Sway, a network of 40,000 women bloggers. She recently told *ChicagoBusiness.com* that some of her top clients boast millions of monthly page views.

Like other media spheres, the corner of cyberspace devoted to Mommy Blogs is an echo chamber. The writers read and promote each other. They lob some of the same topics back and forth. They adopt the writing styles and tropes of *Babble’s* Top 100. It’s as much of an insider’s group as the Sunday morning television news shows. Or the East coast feedback loop which ensures that the author interviewed on National Public Radio is the one whose book was reviewed in *The New York Times* on the topic *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* recently published essays.

The Mommy Bloggers who manage to distinguish themselves from the heap do so with their distinctive content and are often, not coincidentally, professional writers or web designers. Their success inspires imitators and the echoes reverberate.

Read. Comment. Repeat.

Of all the audience building strategies mentioned during my interviews, the most widely cited one is reading and commenting on other bloggers' sites, particularly ones that are similar to their own. The explicit goal of this strategy is reciprocity. The bloggers comment on each other's sites, and become each other's audience.

“At least half your readers are other bloggers,” says Stephanie Sprenger, who has been writing about parenting her two young daughters at her blog, *Mommy, For Real*. “They read you, so you read them. It’s a very supportive community.” Sprenger admits that when she first started blogging, she thought her readers would be “regular people” who found her blog by chance, or through a Google search, or on a recommendation from another reader. Her friend Kate Hall -- who had built up a large following on her own blog, *Can I Get Another Bottle of Whine* -- clued her in to the importance of reciprocal reading and commenting, and introduced her to other bloggers. Sprenger says the introductions boosted her readership and she continues to use this strategy, despite the time it takes. “My life would be easier if I had 8,000 readers who are inspired or entertained by what I write,” she says. “But that’s not the case. You have to read other bloggers to be read. It’s really very time consuming. If I’m not reaching out to other bloggers, I’m not getting readers.”

Sprenger launched her blog in June 2012, and is the newest blogger I interviewed. She's also the one who is most engrossed in reciprocal blog participation. The other bloggers reported that this strategy helped them first establish an audience, but became less important over time. Rosas, who has been blogging since 2010, says it was the one tactic she used in the beginning to attract a following. "I visited other blogs, and they'd visit back," she explains. *Babble* ranked her blog #41 in its list of the top 100 Mom Blogs last year.

Melissa Ford (who started *Stirrup Queens* in 2006) and Rita Arens (who started *Surrender, Dorothy* in 2004) both work as editors at BlogHer, a network of 3,000 women's blogs. They both say that reciprocal blog reading is a tactic that was more important years ago than it is today. But they have a following today. As Sprenger notes, once a blogger establishes a strong readership, she tends to reduce her reciprocal reading. "It would be so much easier to be a famous blogger who doesn't need to do all this work reading and commenting on other blogs," Sprenger says. "Someone like *Divine Secrets of a Domestic Diva*. Bloggers like her, they don't need to comment."

The type of blogs a blogger engages in matters. The more similar they are to the writer's own blog, the more effective the reciprocity. Alise Wright, who has been blogging since 2011 topics of faith and interfaith relationships at *Alise...Write!*, says that the readers of other blogs she participated in, not just the blog authors themselves, became her readers. "Commenting on other blogs with similar audiences helped me grow my own blog," Wright says.

Anita Blanchard writes about her family life and about being a working mother. She started her blog in 2006 as a place to chronicle her efforts to become pregnant and have children. Her blog, *This That and the Mother Thing*, became a resource for information on fertility treatment. She tells me her initial audience came from other blogs. She read and commented on blogs about fertility, and those blog readers and writers became her readers. Reciprocal reading and commenting allows like-minded women to have ongoing discussions, Blanchard explains, “a chance to have a conversation.”

Blanchard is a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina, and has published papers on women bloggers. “Blogs give you the idea that you are not alone in this process,” she says. “Motherhood is so isolating. For working mothers I think it’s even worse, because they don’t have a chance to hang out with other moms while they are at work.” Reading blogs allows women to hang out online and alleviates feelings of isolation, she says.

Blog software developers have made it easier and easier for bloggers to bounce around from blog to similar blog. Popular blog “content management systems” (CMS) like WordPress, Google’s Blogger and Squarespace, can be set up to prompt readers to drop a link to their own blog url alongside a personal comment on the post they just read. Similarly, bloggers often promote each other’s posts by using trackbacks, which are links to one another’s posts. Some CMS platforms let bloggers add a feature to their site that allows readers to automatically toggle to another blog of a related theme. Google’s

Blogger calls this the “Next Blog” button. With one click, the reader is ushered to a new, random site offering up similarly themed content. These features allow bloggers to efficiently introduce themselves to each other, without the tedium of wider web searches.

Bloggers have institutionalized the audience-building strategy of reciprocal reading with two marketing strategies: blogger-to-blogger awards and blogrolls. Blogger-to-blogger awards are accolades that bloggers pass among themselves, to recognize good writing, design or other blog attributes. Currently, the three most common ones in the Mommy Blog community are The Liebster Award, The Versatile Blogger Award and the Beautiful Blogger Award. Bloggers are nominated for the awards by other recipients, voted on by any interested readers, and then are obligated, in turn, to pass on the award by nominating three to five other bloggers for the distinction. The process works like a chain letter. A graphical button accompanies the award, which the honored blogger can display on her site. The goal is to boost the readership of up-and-coming bloggers by having the recipients read and evaluate other bloggers to nominate. “Bloggers have an incentive to have the awards mean something,” says Sprenger, who received three awards the week we spoke. “My home page will always show I received these awards.”

Until the prevalence of Facebook and Twitter, blogrolls were a ubiquitous feature on Mommy Blogs, according to many of the bloggers I interviewed. “I had a blogroll, and would link to other bloggers who linked to me,” says Stephanie Richter, who wrote a blog called *Mayonnaise Sandwich* for a few years. (A blogroll is a list of hyperlinks to blogs that the blogger recommends.) Blogging etiquette dictates that bloggers include

links to sites that link to their own, Richter explains. But now, social media sites have become the preferred way to share links to recommended blogs, according to Arens. “Blogrolls have all but disappeared in the wake of social media,” she says, “which is the way to get readers now.”

Like. Tweet. Share.

Most of the women I interviewed told me that they strategically use Facebook and Twitter to market their blog to readers. The bloggers who told me they don’t do any deliberate marketing of their blog do, in fact, use Facebook and/or Twitter to market their blog, as evidenced by the activity on their Facebook pages and their Twitter streams, which show abundant evidence of blog promotion. Bloggers attract readers with Facebook and Twitter in multiple ways.

The most basic way is by putting a link to her blog on her Facebook page and Twitter profile. Blanchard reports that about 10 to 20 percent of her Facebook friends click over to her blog, while “only occasionally” will her Twitter followers convert to blog readers. Richter found most of her blog readers by advertising it on her Facebook page. The ripple effect of Facebook brought new readers to her blog regularly. “My sorority sisters linked me to their Facebook pages,” she says. Their friends became readers. “Some reader found me and asked if he could friend me on Facebook, and his friends read me.”

Similarly, bloggers place icons called social media “share buttons” or “plugins” on the home page of their blogs. When readers click on the Facebook icon, they are directed to the blogger’s personal Facebook page, or, more commonly, a designated blog Facebook fan page the blogger set up. Readers can “Like,” “Friend” and “Share” as they choose, thereby encouraging their own friends/followers to read the blog. The Twitter icon generates a link to the blog url that the tweeter shares with her followers, encouraging them to visit the site. All the bloggers I interviewed have these buttons on their site’s home page. Most of them also have social media share buttons at the end of each individual blog post. This allows readers to share a link to the specific post. Both these social media initiatives rely on readers to share information within their own social media networks.

Another channel bloggers fish to hook readers flows in both directions. Bloggers send out links to each new post they write to their Facebook friends and Twitter followers. With the exception of Richter, all the bloggers do this routinely. This social media initiative starts with the writer -- she shares the link within her network -- and usually ends with new readers -- people who have received a link to the blog from a mutual friend or follower.

The final social media tactic the women I interviewed told me they use is the most strategic, and can only be accomplished through Twitter. Bloggers identify a small number of themes they routinely blog about, and send out Twitter messages about these themes. This creates “brand awareness” around the blog, and also converts Twitter followers into blog readers.

Aisha Sultan, who writes the *Dirty Laundry* parenting blog for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, tells me she promotes her blog posts directly in 5 percent of her tweets, and promotes the themes of her posts (parenting, family, politics, sports) in the remaining 95 percent of her tweets. She tweets her own insights, or links to stories from other media, reflecting these themes. Sprenger, likewise, is formulaic with her tweeting: one-third of her tweets promote her blog; one-third promote another blogger; one-third promote her blog themes, or her “personal brand.”

Although the other bloggers I interviewed didn’t confess to Twitter tactics, I examined their Twitter streams and found they all follow a strategy aligned with Sprenger’s, with the exception of Richter. (“Twitter never worked for me,” she says. I can’t be witty in 140 characters or less.”) Arens notes that, as a blog reader, she chooses blogs based on social media links other bloggers send her. “I’ll click on links people share on Twitter or Facebook or email me about.”

Get personal.

The bloggers I interviewed emphasize the importance of writing authentic personal stories, with their own voice, as a means to build audience. Sultan tells me that when she and her colleagues at the *Post-Dispatch* were establishing the *Dirty Laundry* blog, they were aware that a blogger’s voice was different than a traditional journalist’s voice, and she had to adapt accordingly. “It’s really awkward for journalists to talk about their families in a public forum,” she says. “We weren’t good at it. We weren’t used to it. Bloggers are much better at sharing personal stories. We learned a lot from them.”

Kimberly Voss blogs primarily about the women editors who created the newspaper and magazine content for women readers during World War II through the 1970s. But her blog, *Women's Page History*, also has posts about her family life. Voss speculates that the reason readers choose blogs over traditional media is precisely the personal stories they find. "My guess is that there is a friendliness, a personal connection in blogs that does not exist in the same way in other media," she says. Every blogger I interviewed stressed this point. Relaying information through authentic, personal stories attracts readers, and keeps them returning for more.

Blanchard began her blog as a childless woman facing fertility problems. Her audience is still growing, although she hasn't blogged about IVF for years. Her life situation has changed, but her voice has remained constant. Readers return to follow up with her, now that she has three children, for that same voice. New readers browse her archives for a prequel to her current posts. "They know what we went through to have kids," she says. "The autobiographical nature of blogs makes people return. Readers want to hear your life story." Wright mentions the same reason for reader loyalty. "My tone is very conversational, and that makes people feel like they know me," she says.

Arens suspects the reason people read her blog is because they enjoy her personal perspective. "The only reason I can imagine anyone would read *Surrender, Dorothy* is because they like my voice," she says. Her voice caught the attention of *Babble's* blog judges last year, who ranked *Surrender, Dorothy* at #79 of the Top 100 Mom Blogs.

The most-read women's blogs show the power of voice in attracting audience. Ree Drummond's blog, *The Pioneer Woman*, (#17 in *Babble's* Top 100) does not have novel content. The home and garden tips and lush photos could be lifted from a women's magazine from any decade since 1950, or from any of the other beautifully designed lifestyle blogs -- a common Mommy Blog sub-genre. But Drummond's voice, oozing with cowgirl charisma, has charmed herds of readers. Her strawberry cake post isn't simply a recipe for strawberry cake. It's a story about her affection for her father-in-law. "My father-in-law loves sweets, you see," she writes on her post accompanying the recipe, "and he also knows that I have a soft spot where he's concerned. Delivering him sweets is one of my favorite things to do."

Mormon mothers blog enthusiastically, and have created their own niche in the blogosphere. Their blogs are paeans to hearth and home, showcasing photos of their many children, and usually containing two hallmark links somewhere on their home page: one to the website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the other an offer for a free "Book of Mormon." But Mormon Stephanie Nielson's blog, *Nie Nie Dialogues*, is a standout (#40 in *Babble's* Top 100.) She's attracted a following of Mormon and non-Mormon readers who enjoy her uplifting posts about her ongoing recovery from an accident that burned most of her body. In her idiosyncratic style, she wrote recently about celebrating her youngest child's first birthday while simultaneously recuperating from gall bladder surgery, weaving enchanting party photos into a post about gratitude and familial love.

Post with persistence and patience.

Some bloggers post daily. Some post on a weekly schedule. All of the bloggers I interviewed post at least weekly, and credit frequent updates to their blog for building up audience. Shannon Hayes, who blogs at *ShannonHayes.info*, says she switched her posting frequency last fall, and started writing daily short posts, with one long post on Tuesdays only. “That seemed to cause the single greatest jump in weekly visits,” she says. Wright noticed the same outcome when she started posting everyday.

The bloggers mentioned the importance of frequent blogging over time to build audience. “I think simply time and continuing to blog ARE the reasons the blog grew,” says Ford. Rosas says that her circle of readers went from a small group of friends and family to an international readership because of persistence over time. “Time and dedication are the only thing,” she says, “TIME.”

Even Sultan, who had the benefit of the *Post-Dispatch* readership at inception, says readership outside the newspaper base grew with time. “It has taken me years to build a following,” she says. “Years.”

The reasons the Mom Bloggers cited for the audience-boosting effects of frequent updating over time were subtle. Their writing sharpened, their voice developed, they found their “online community,” their readers referred other readers over the years.

I find it noteworthy to mention that none of the Mom Bloggers say they use search engine optimization tactics to attract readers. Even when discussing how persistent blogging over time has built their following, none of them attributed the reason for this

phenomenon most often cited in blogging instructional literature: Search engines favor blogs that are updated frequently, and show a large amount of content. As blog consultant Darren Rowse, who writes at *ProBlogger.net*, explains in a post about attracting audience, search engines index these sites, making them display higher in internet searches.

Stick to a specialty.

Half of the bloggers in my interview pool are generalists, writing about a broad range of topics related to women and family life. But five of them blog primarily about specific topics. The majority of their posts somehow relate to their niche. The design, the images, the links, the overall ambience of their blog reflects their specialization. These five bloggers report that writing about a niche topic has helped them build and maintain an audience.

“I believe that my readers aren’t normal browsers, but instead are coming to me because they really want to think about the the topics I’m discussing,” says Shannon Hayes, who blogs about ecologically-sound living on her own blog and the *Yes! Magazine* blog. “They are looking for inspiration to continue on a sustainable life path, and they seem eager to read about my thoughts and experiences on this path.”

Ford and Blanchard, who both write about aspects of infertility, report that their readers use their blogs as resources for information about treatments, adoption, miscarriage, testing and other topics that weigh heavily on the minds of women living with fertility questions. They both tell me that specializing has encouraged readership.

“I provide the same medical and research information that they can find somewhere else, but it’s told within my story,” Blanchard says. “It’s written in a way people can understand it. I explain what I am going through, and they can get it, or relate to it.”

Focusing blog posts on a single topic also tends to encourage readers to comment, and to return to the blog, respondents report. Wright says that posts about interfaith marriage, the special focus of her blog, generates more reader comments. “We have established a kind of community,” Wright explains, “and people want to participate in their community.”

Richter, who was a generalist when she wrote her blog, tells me that she reads specialized Mom Blogs for specific information on traveling with children, upcycling (“like how to make a birdcage out of an old combat boot”) and Southern recipes. She is planning a trip to Italy this summer, and has been following ex-pat Mommy Bloggers who live in Rome. “They write about stuff that would never show up on any website,” she says. “This is how I found out about Gladiator Camp for my kids. Commercial sites, like *Fodor’s*, aren’t as helpful with precise information.”

I read through some of the posts on each of *Babble’s* Top 100 Mom Blogs to gauge the range of specialization. I discovered a paradox. Among the blogs which focus primarily on one subject, four topics dominate. How differentiated can a blog be if it’s about a popular subject? Infertility, mental illness, self-acceptance and parenting a child with special needs are the four most common niches. (I didn’t include lifestyle nor humor Mom Blogs in my niche count. They both represent the overall tone and style of many of *Babble’s* Top 100 blogs, but are more sub-genres than niches.)

The mom blogosphere also echoes with the voices of Latina and African American mothers who write about particular issues of interest to the minorities they represent. Their ethnicity is their niche, as white women still represent the majority of the genre's writers. Some of the *Babble* Top 100 blogs are mash-ups of multiple niches, like *Uppercase Woman* (#28) where Cecily Kellogg writes about her alcohol addiction and her infertility; or *Creciendo con Todas Las Habilidades* (#63) where Eliana Tardio writes about raising two children with Down's Syndrome.

Publish elsewhere.

Bloggers expose their writing to new readers by tapping into the audience of other online publications. Large blog networks like BlogHer, with 55 million readers (BlogHer.com, 2013), and Mamapedia, with 3.5 million readers (mamasource.com, 2013), are two of the largest. While these sites have a group of Mom Bloggers whose blogs (the site and all its posts) are part of their publishing networks, they also accept many non-networked Mom Blogger's individual posts for publication, subject to editorial approval.

Bloggers who have had posts accepted for redistribution on these sites report surges in readership. "Mamapedia is a great way to gain readers," Sprenger says. Not only is the individual post read by a new sets of eyes, the blogger's site is linked within the post, introducing new readers. Sprenger says she doesn't know how many new readers became regular subscribers to her blog, but she knows her audience increased. "But BlogHer definitely brought me the biggest reader draw," she says.

Other bloggers contribute posts to sites that are designed to feature many different bloggers all writing about a central theme. The bloggers I interviewed have had posts published on *The Power of Moms* (inspirational and faith posts); *50-Something Moms Blog* (for mid-life mothers); *Tiki Tiki* (for Latina mothers); *My PHEME* (humor posts and videos about mothers aging with glamour); and *The Mouthy Housewives* (witty advice posts) among others. Posting on these collaborative blogs introduces new readers to the author, and encourages the readers to visit the author's personal blog.

Often, an established blogger with a large following will invite or accept guest posts, drawing new readers to the guest writer's blog, which is typically linked to the post. Wright says that accepting invitations to guest posts on popular blogs "helped me grow my audience significantly." Voss says that guest posting on blogs like the *The Feminist Kitchen*, and the *Ms. Magazine Blog* keep her engaged with an audience that might also read her blog.

Many women started their blogs as a way to showcase their writing, because many are either professional or aspiring writers. The blog serves as a portfolio. Submitting their writing for publication outside their blog is part of the work of being a writer. Many of *Babble's* Top 100 bloggers are writers whose blog is one of multiple venues for their work. Alice Bradley, for example, is a fiction and non-fiction magazine writer, book author, writing coach, has an M.F.A. in writing, and has blogged at *Finslippy* (ranked #20 in *Babble's* Top 100) since 2004. Joanne Bamberger is a former broadcast journalist who now writes the blog *PunditMom* (ranked #64). She also writes books and

is a regular contributor to the *Huffington Post*, among other major media outlets. Stefanie Wilder Taylor has written five books, hosts a parent show on Nick Jr., and blogs about motherhood at *Baby on Bored* (#42). Rebecca Woolf, a client of talent agent Danielle Wiley, “has garnered hundreds of thousands of monthly page views,” as reported in *ChicagoBusiness.com*. On her blog *Girls Gone Child* (ranked #5,) Woolf describes her writing career: “Along with writing for web and print, I also occasionally write scripted things because I live in Los Angeles and Final Draft software comes free with your first apartment.”

But bloggers don’t just bring writing expertise to their sites. Many bring a background in graphic design. Gabrielle Blair of *Design Mom* (#3) is a former art director and graphic designer. Heather Armstrong was a web designer before her blog *Dooce* (#4) became a lucrative phenomenon. Jan Halverson blogs about handmade crafts at *Poppytalk* (#67) and is a professional designer who writes for *Wired Magazine*.

Mommy bloggers who have the professional skills to document their lives with finesse attract readers like lint to a dryer sheet. Their polished content stands out from that of their amateur competitors, who are inspired to read, share and imitate.

Analytics are boring. Unicorns are not.

The bloggers I interviewed work at least as hard attracting readers as they do writing posts. The six tactics I detail above are the ones that were most commonly cited by the majority of the Mom Bloggers. But they use others. Newer bloggers, like Sprenger, report that “Blog Hops” (A group of bloggers all write a post on the same

subject a designated day of the week, then “hop around” to each others’ sites and comment; also know as “Link Ups.”) have boosted her readership. Established bloggers, like Rosas and Arens, speak publicly to women’s groups, parents groups, at blogging conferences and elsewhere, which helps convert live audience members to blog audience readers. “I do a lot of outreach to build community,” says Sultan, who also speaks to local groups. “People have to know you as a person. Once they do, if they are interested in you, they can find you and read you.”

I asked them all about their use of analytic tools, such as Google Analytics. What metrics most interest them? I was surprised that most of them don’t bother to extract much information from their analytics, if they even use them at all. Most of the bloggers track one statistic, such as page views, or use a site meter to know their number of visitors. Beyond those basics, they tell me they really don’t bother to analyze their traffic. Hayes was typical. While she could tell me her weekly traffic has increased from 50 to 1,500 readers from her blog’s inception, she confesses: “I can’t figure out how to use analytics, and if I did, I might spend all my time thinking about that, rather than trying to generate good quality writing.”

Quality writing is undoubtedly part of what *Babble’s* judges look for when they scout talent in the blogosphere. The echo chamber reverberates with some of the same Mommy Blog cliches - pour me another drink, behold my wacky dog (or cat or both,) allow me a humblebrag about my child. I never thought I’d figure out why so many women randomly mention unicorns and zombies in their posts, until I logged onto

Babble's #1 ranked Mom Blog, Jenny Lawson's *The Bloggess*. Unicorns and zombies are common Lawson references, although they're hardly random in her quirky posts. And quiriness like hers makes the mom blogosphere the most amusing echo chamber around.

Here is an excerpt from her post where she meets her literary hero, Neil Gaiman, and nervously describes for him and her husband, Victor, which creature would win in a unicorn vs. zombie "epic battle for world domination."

I explained that the zombies would win because (as we all know) unicorns can only appear to virgins and so all the unicorns would be forced to hang out in elementary school halls while the zombies continue to multiply into enormous hordes and so the unicorn number would stay exactly the same because unicorns are all about innocence so it's not like they're going to have sex in front of school children so mathematically the zombies would win by sheer number. Then Neil and Victor just stared at me and I was all "It's science" and then Neil conceded that he did see my point but that it wasn't like zombies are having sex and multiplying either and I clarified that I meant they were multiplying by being bitey, not by having zombie sex and he was all "Ah obviously" and then I may have said something about how zombie porn is a pretty-much untapped market and Neil may have agreed with me. It all got kind of fuzzy and I began wishing I hadn't hit the bar before coming.

- Jenny Lawson, *The Bloggess*, from her post "And then I met Neil Gaiman"

Conclusion

Mom blogs have become a commodity - abundant, similar, easily accessible. The blog platform is designed for self-publishing with the click of a button, with no internal mechanism checking factual accuracy, design quality, topic relevance or compelling writing. There are no official editors in the blogosphere. There is a lot of schlock.

But there are many blogs with fantastic content, blogs that demonstrate what *Babble* simply calls “talent,” blogs with captivating design, enchanting photographs and powerful stories. These are the blogs that readers visit again and again. The women creating these blogs hone their craft. They use their blog as a tool to sharpen their writing, and they use their readers to edit their work. Readers give direct comments; readers share links with their friends; readers weigh in with their opinions; readers send private emails and Facebook messages to bloggers; readers return. Bloggers who bother to incorporate this feedback into their future posts improve their blog over time.

Alise Wright and Aisha Sultan are the most analytical of the women I interviewed. They mine information from their site metrics and use it to gauge reader interest and determine future post topics. “I like to know what topics move people to share my work with others, so I’ll watch the number of shares steadily,” Wright says. “Hits are great, but when people spread my work with their friends, that matters much more to me.” Surprisingly, most of the other women don’t bother to look at their referrals. If they did, they’d likely reap the rewards of enhanced readership like Wright has.

Stephanie Sprenger laments the time she spends reading and commenting on other blogs instead of tending to domestic duties. She bothered to put a function on her blog that allows readers to subscribe, placing every new post in their Inbox --- a true test of reader devotion. But she never bothered to check how many subscribers she has. Until recently, she didn't measure any of her easily attainable readership statistics with analytics. "I never went through all of that hoopla," she says. But that hoopla could tell her how much of the time she spends participating on other blogs translates into new readers of her own.

Why the lack of analysis? Because Mom Bloggers don't approach their blogs analytically. They approach them creatively. Writing is their creative outlet, the blog is their studio. "I follow my gut and my creative instincts," Shannon Hayes tells me when I ask how she decides what to write about. "There are days when I reach lots of folks, and days when I am speaking to just one. Both matter," she says.

These bloggers eschew the idea of marketing their blog to current and potential readers, and don't acknowledge that the links they send out on Facebook and Twitter *are*, in fact, marketing. They don't categorize social media use as marketing; they categorize it as another route to engage readers with words. Readers matter to these women because they validate their identity as writers.

Analytics and marketing, to these and many other Mom bloggers, are for business endeavors. Their blogs are writing endeavors.

They blog because they like to write. Their goal isn't to gain advertisers. They blog because it provides a platform for their writing. They seek readers because they want an audience for their writing. Their audience motivates them to continue to blog. All the initiatives they take to reach readers -- commenting on other blogs, writing Facebook posts, tweeting, posting frequently, writing with a strong voice, specializing in a niche topic, writing for other online publications -- are also, simultaneously, writing initiatives.

And what happens over time to writers who write a lot? They improve. Readers ask for more. They deliver. Like any other craft, logging many hours of purposeful practice yields results. The best Mom Bloggers are in it for the writing experience and exposure the platform brings them. And their blogs rise above the commodity blogs. They distinguish themselves with honest, vivid, concise, aggressively original storytelling -- the essence of good writing.

Kelly Oxford, the most recent Mom blogger to secure a book contract, epitomizes the power of blogging to build a writing career. In a blog post, she rants about the entertainment media portraying her as "an instant success," and points to her disciplined daily blogging for 12 years as integral to launching her professional writing career. She advises other aspiring writers work hard at the craft and self-publish:

1. Be a good writer. You don't have to be amazing, but be a very good writer and above all have a point of view. Be honest when you write, because when you try to be something you are not, it shows (and when it shows it stinks.)

2. Write. Write a lot, all the time. Every day. Re-write. Never show people your first drafts, trust me, it's crap. The beauty of writing is that you can take 4 days to write that one page and make that page so beautiful that people cry/laugh/shit themselves when they read it.

3. Get your writing out there. Make videos, start a website. Self-publish and self-promote.

If you're thinking "That's a lot of work for something that might not pay off"

THEN THIS IS NOT YOUR BAG SORRY. You do that, and you do it with

NO HOPES OF EVER MAKING A LIVING AT IT. ...

If you aren't already doing it because you love it, you probably aren't a writer.

- Kelly Oxford, *eject*, from her post "26june12"

Oxford's book follows her success as a comedy writer, a career that evolved from her humorous tweets she sent which often promoted her blog. Her short, sassy quips make ideal tweets, and highlight the intertwined nature of self-publishing platforms. Further research on other social media platforms that bloggers use to draw attention to their blog would benefit practitioners. Likewise, research into how bloggers with no initial intention of monetizing their blogs wind up with advertisers would serve the industry. Did bloggers change their mind and seek advertising? Did advertisers solicit them, and if so, how did advertisers find them?

Like other bloggers, Oxford writes her posts in a raw, unpolished style. But her blog led her to a book publisher. Do book, newspaper and other publishers identify and accept this blog style as appealing to readers? Research on the codification and acceptability of blog writing style would intrigue wordsmiths in old and new media alike.

BLOGGERS INTERVIEWED

Rita Arens, *Surrender, Dorothy*. Arens writes primarily about writing, parenting her daughter, healthcare, work and politics. She is a senior editor at BlogHer and a freelance writer. She has been blogging since 2004, and was named a Top100 Mom Blogger in 2012 by the parenting blog network *Babble*.

Anita Blanchard, *This, That and the Mother Thing*. Blanchard writes about her family life and about being a working mother. She started her blog in 2006 as a place to chronicle her efforts to become pregnant and have children. Her blog became a resource for information on fertility treatment. Blanchard is a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina and has published papers on women bloggers.

Melissa Ford, *Stirrup Queens*. Ford started her blog in 2006, writing about adoption, fertility and loss. She also writes frequently about online publishing and blogging. Ford is the Blogging and Social Media Section Editor at BlogHer. *The Wall Street Journal* named *Stirrup Queens* one of the Top Motherhood Blogs in 2008.

Shannon Hayes, *Shannon Hayes.info*. Hayes has been blogging about sustainable farm living since 2011, after publishing a book about the subject called “Radical Homemaking.” She writes about “homemaking as an ecological movement.” Her offbeat lifestyle has been written about in the national media. Hayes has been featured in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, National Public Radio and *Elle Magazine*.

Stephanie Richter, *Mayonnaise Sandwich*. Richter blogged about home-schooling and family life, from the perspective of a southerner transplanted to the Midwest. She stopped blogging when a change in her family situation made it emotionally impossible. She remains an avid blog reader.

Alexandra Rosas, *Good Day Regular People*. Rosas writes about her family, writing, and the support she finds in relationships with other women online. She was named a Top100 Mom Blogger in 2012 by the parenting blog network *Babble*. Rosas has been blogging since 2010.

Stephanie Sprenger, *Mommy, for Real*. Sprenger writes about her life as a working mom parenting two young daughters. She also writes often about female friendships. She has been blogging since June, 2012.

Aisha Sultan, *Dirty Laundry*. Sultan created and writes the parenting blog for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Although she is not an independent blogger, I opted to include her interview in my research because she is the blog originator, having pitched the idea to the newspaper after identifying a dearth of parenting news coverage in the *Post-Dispatch*.

Kimberly Voss, *Women's Page History*. Voss blogs about the women editors who created the newspaper and magazine content for women readers during World War II through the 1970s. Her blog also has posts about her family life. She also contributes to online publications, such as *Ms. Magazine*, about women bloggers. Voss is Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Central Florida.

Alise Wright, *Alise...Write!* Wright blogs primarily about faith and interfaith relationships. She recently started soliciting guest posts for her blog on the topic of “unexpected relationships.” She has been blogging since 2011.

POSSIBILITIES FOR PUBLICATION

Folio Magazine - The online *Folio*, foliomag.com, has a topic section, Audience Development, devoted to articles about building audience. Many articles focus on online platforms. Recent articles discuss subjects such as social media overtaking search as a top referral source, and patterns in content sharing and clickbacks.

Ms. Magazine - *Ms.* often publishes stories about women's work styles and women's use of technology. The online magazine has a blog, the *Ms. Magazine Blog*, which publishes posts on a range of topics, including the media. Within the "media" topic, the blog features a further subdivision called "Internet + Tech." My article might be a candidate for submission in either area of the magazine. I would break it up into a series of blog posts, however, before pitching it to the *Ms. Magazine Blog*.

Women's Studies in Communication (WISC) - The Organization for Research on Women and Communication publishes this journal as a forum for research, reviews and commentary on communication and gender. The editor encourages authors submitting manuscripts for consideration to write for a general audience. My scan of the the published articles, however, indicates the journal typically selects scholarly research.

The Blog Guidebook - This online book, blogguidebook.com, is actually a blog targeted at women bloggers seeking information about social networking and web design. The blog's emphasis is on blog improvement through design and audience development. The site accepts submissions from guest bloggers. I would break up my articles into a series of blog posts before submitting it for consideration.

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APPENDIX

ORIGINAL PROJECT PROPOSAL

J 8098 Suzanne Langlois November 28, 2012 Professional Project Proposal

INTRODUCTION

When my twelve-year-old daughter, Fiona, started sleeping through her alarm, and growling at me when I tried to wake her, I embarked on an online quest for a very loud alarm clock. I found some really neat stuff online: a CD alarm that plays your favorite track in a gentle crescendo; a little white robot clock that wheels itself off the nightstand and across the bedroom beeping garbled robot speak along the way; a simple black alarm clock whose only feature is a giant red LCD display blinking the time in synch with an annoying honk. These all worked for awhile, until she became accustomed to their rousing features and went back to sleep.

Then my husband, John, switched our home-delivered daily from *The New York Times* to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and Fiona discovered the comics section. Now she had a good reason to get out of bed: beating her little brother to the funnies.

My kids devour the section every day. They talk about the characters. They point out strips I absolutely must read. They laugh out loud - in the morning! I'm, of course, thrilled that the comics have brought levity into our morning routine and turned my kids into newspaper readers. But often I find a little black cloud eclipsing my sunny morning thoughts. "What if the *Post* cuts the comics section?" I worry, "Will my kids ever get out of bed?"

I'm haunted by this thought because I'm a mom and mom's worry about stupid things all the time to avoid worrying about big things all the time. I'm also haunted by this thought because it happened to me. Newspapers cut my favorite section - the women's pages.

I never paid much attention to the women's sections until I first came to the Missouri School of Journalism in 1992, and was granted an assistantship with Nancy Beth Jackson, then program director of the Penney-Missouri Awards and Workshops, which, starting in 1960, granted awards to the best in women's page journalism. (The program is now the Missouri Lifestyle Journalism Awards.)

I learned about the layout, the content, the voices and the advertising targeting women readers from newspapers around the country. I witnessed how the Penney-Missouri Awards and Workshops encouraged journalists to broaden their range of coverage for women beyond the "four f's" -- food, family, fashion, and furnishing. I rifled through the Penney-Missouri archives and learned about the work of journalists like Roberta Applegate, who wrote stories about women at work, most notably the women working at NASA. I read women's sections from the *Miami Herald* edited by Marjorie Paxton, which shone with engaging narrative writing intended for readers as interested in politics as they were about family life.

I was particularly intrigued by the role these journalists played during the women's rights movement. They embraced women's changing roles in society, supported the ERA and liberation, and while also supporting women's traditional domestic lives.

The writers and editors of the women's sections recognized that women readers are a diverse, eclectic, complex group, and the sections they produced reflected this variety.

The Penney-Missouri submissions from the nineteen-eighties and -nineties turned me onto journalists who took the classic "four f's" into a contemporary context, after shedding the "women's section" label. Writers like Laura Shapiro, for example, who wrote for *The Real Paper* in Boston before a prolific magazine career, brought food writing beyond recipe publishing and into narrative storytelling, while also covering a range of women's issues.

I enjoyed my assistantship with Nancy Beth Jackson, and I started appreciating and reading the women's pages and the lifestyle sections that they eventually morphed into. Reading these sections as a 24-year-old was like trying on my mom's wardrobe - some of it suited me, and some of it was designed for older women. But what always grabbed my attention were the strong voices of the women columnists and feature writers who managed to bring perspective, personal narrative, humor and strong writing to the section. Marquee syndicated columnist like Letitia Baldrige, Erma Bombeck and Nora Ephron, as well as the talented local journalists they inspired, recognized that deftly writing about aspects of women's everyday lives attracted readers who enjoyed relating to the sentiments and experiences which so often paralleled their own lives.

When I first entered the Master's program in 1992, I never thought about writing for an intended female audience. Newspapers hadn't published women's pages as separate sections for decades, and I wasn't interested in writing about lifestyles. I aspired

to do investigative and business reporting, and settled into the business beat at *The Missourian*. But as I was finishing my semester at the paper, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, so I left the Master's program to care for her in St. Louis, and took a job as a staff writer at *The Riverfront Times*.

I intended to return to the program within a year or two, but instead continued to work at *The Riverfront Times*, since actually being a reporter was more stimulating than studying to be a reporter. Then, I started a coffee business with another journalist. Eventually, I got married, bought a house, had two children, found a cat, adopted a dog, grew the business, cared for my dying father, sold the business, sabbaticaled in Ireland, started teaching. And all the while, I read newspapers.

Like so many women readers, I sought out the news and the voices that spoke to me as a working woman, mother, wife, caregiver, homemaker, pet minder, sister and friend. I found them sporadically in newspapers, like *The New York Times*' Lisa Belkin, and *The Times*' Caitlin Moran. Often, I'd find their books, such as Amy Chua's "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," Peggy Orenstein's "Cinderella Ate My Daughter" and Sandra Tsing Loh's "Mother on Fire." But mostly, I found them in the blogosphere.

Women publish nearly four million blogs for an intended female audience on the subjects showcased in the women's pages of yore. Family, food, fashion, furnishings and feminism dominate the topics. But work, health, politics, sex and money get plenty of play. According to research compiled by H&R Block, only about 500 of these 3.9 million blogs have "considerable power and reach." (Gulbransen, 2012)

After chasing down the diaspora of women writers that I first encountered in the Penney-Missouri submissions, whom I longed to read as their relevance to my life increased, I found their contemporary counterpart in droves online. I don't read a fraction of them. I follow just a few. But a few is plenty to fulfill what I'm looking for - news, opinions and advice, well written by women for women. A place where I can find reviews of deafeningly loud alarm clocks for night owls, or I can participate in a discussion about cultivating personal responsibility in teenagers.

What I propose doing for my professional skills component of my project is to create a blog in this genre. I intend to build it up over the 14 week project duration by trying different techniques to attract readers. For the analysis component of my project, I propose studying how bloggers and readers find each other.

I would like to continue to write the blog after completing the Professional Project. Ideally, I would like to maintain this blog for years, with the goal of establishing a small community of readers and participants. I don't plan to monetize the blog during my project term. But after I build up readership, which typically takes years, I will market the blog to online advertising networks.

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS COMPONENT

• Journalism Specialty/Area of Emphasis

MEDIA Blogs written by women, for women, are often lumped into a genre that has come to be known as "Mommy Blogs." The merits of this title have been debated among women bloggers for years. Like a Spanx undergarment, some women hate it

because it constricts, panders to vanity, and conforms to outmoded societal expectations of women. Others swear by it for its sleek simplicity and marketing brilliance. I'm happy sitting on the fence, dangling a Jimmy Choo on one side and a Birkenstock on the other. While I can't ignore or dodge the title, I can probably avoid it as often as possible to do my bit part in making the the world a more harmonious place.

While the term originated with women who launched blogs years ago as a way of publicly sharing parenting chronicles, the term has "spread to encompass blogs that were never intended to be explorations of one's inability to find time to shower," writes Janice D'Arcy, a *Washington Post* reporter and "on-parenting" blogger who says she doesn't know how to react when she is called a Mommy Blogger. "The term now covers pretty much any female writer who has ever mentioned her own child and who, even occasionally, writes about an issue that relates to parenting." (D'Arcy, 2012)

By this definition, my proposed blog would fall into the Mommy Blog genre. I propose writing a blog about family life. Most successful blogs have a meta-narrative or specialize in a niche topic which give the blog structure, purpose, and an overall "brand." I propose structuring my blog around a loose narrative framework of starting an apiary.

In January and February, a beekeeper prepares for the arrival of a colony by building hive boxes, reading and attending workshops. In March, the beekeeper would prepare the ground, place an order for a queen and bees, and plant nectar sources. In April, the bees arrive and are placed in the hive. April marks the end of the preparation, and the beginning of beekeeping season. The novice moves from preparing for bees to

being a beekeeper, much like the end of a gestation period is marked by a delivery. This trope ties thematically into the subjects I plan to write about in the blog, such as parenting, business start-ups, and contemporary feminism. It will also help build authenticity, as I will be logging what I am actually doing, and using a purposeful project as a springboard for a broader discussion.

AUDIENCE I will define my target audience using some demographic data on “Mom Bloggers” released in October, 2011, by Scarborough Research (a joint venture between Arbitron Inc. and The Nielsen Company): Women who use the Internet as their primary but not exclusive platform for news and information; are likely college-educated; have at least one child in their household; are “politically engaged and socially mindful”; have an average household income of \$84,000 annually; have either previously read or contributed to blogs written by women. This audience is the same average age, 37, as mothers overall in the greater population. (Scarborough, 2011)

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS Many journalists blog, and most media companies now include blogs in their published news and information offering. Bloggers affiliated with a news organization adhere to the professional standards of that organization. But independent bloggers -- ones who do not write under the auspices of an organization of some sort -- do not share a collective set of professional standards. I propose writing an independent blog, but I plan to adhere to a set of professional standards, not only to ensure that my project has journalistic rigor, but also to acknowledge the importance of establishing a professional code among bloggers.

For the audience I am targeting, BlogHer -- a publishing network of more than 3,000 women-authored blogs -- has refined, codified and publicly disseminated a list of professional standards for the blog platform. These standards have been recognized among its thousands of readers, bloggers and participants for many years, discussed publicly at media conventions, and analyzed in scholarly publications, and thus, I believe, have credibility and durability. Because blogs are interactive, allowing readers to comment publicly on posts, BlogHer requires that both bloggers and readers conform to their code. (BlogHer.com, 2012) I plan to adhere to these standards next semester throughout my professional skills component. As stated on BlogHer.com, they are:

1. "Embrace the spirit of civil disagreement - We agree to agree and to disagree-as strongly as need be-without crossing the boundaries into unacceptable content."

2. "Do not publish unacceptable content - We embrace your diversity of opinions and values but we insist that your content may not include anything unacceptable. We define unacceptable content as anything included or linked that is:

- + Being used to abuse, harass, stalk or threaten a person or persons

- + Libelous, defamatory, knowingly false or misrepresents another person

- + Infringes upon any copyright, trademark, trade secret or patent of any third party

- + Violates any obligation of confidentiality
- + Violates the privacy, publicity, moral or any other right of any third party
- + Contains editorial content that has been commissioned and paid for by a third party, (either cash or goods in barter), and/or contains paid advertising links and/or SPAM or "Stupid Pointless Annoying Messages.”

• **Professional Qualifications**

One of the primary reasons I would like to create a blog is because the project is entrepreneurial. The blog platform allows journalists to bootstrap a publication, control all aspects of the media, maintain autonomy over the work, and take responsibility for every detail, from the visual design and content to the marketing and distribution. Having spent 15 formative years of my work-life as the co-founder of Kaldi’s Coffee, I know that my personality is well suited to an entrepreneurial venture.

Ironically, when I was a business owner, I thought of myself as a journalist who got side- tracked. My partner at Kaldi’s was a Missouri J-School grad, and one of the reasons we decided to open our initial shop was because coffeehouses are to journalists what the Serengeti watering hole is to the wildebeest. St. Louis had no such spots in 1994, so we seized on the opportunity and started Kaldi’s Coffeehouse and Kaldi’s Coffee Roasting Company. Indeed many of our most loyal customers were fellow journalists like Bill McClellan, Bob Duffy and Eric Mink from the *Post-Dispatch*,

Charlie Brennan from KMOX and Karen Foss from KSDK. We talked shop with them from both sides of the counter.

Happily, we were never cursed with enough profit to hire an MBA to operate Kaldi's. We did it ourselves, learning as we went, mostly by mistakes. Our friends were our staff and our customers, whose feedback was our guiding light. We saw opportunities to expand in many ways -- entering the wholesale coffee distribution business, opening up more coffeehouses -- and followed our passion for the business throughout 15 years.

After I sold Kaldi's, I began teaching entrepreneurship and communications at Washington University, as a way to both leverage my experience and bridge my interests. I wasn't convinced that entrepreneurship could be taught, but I'll try most things once if they sound like fun. After reading broadly about entrepreneurship, working with the Skandalaris Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at Washington University, and connecting the dots in my own career, I realized that entrepreneurship is a mindset. It's a way of looking at life.

Entrepreneurs focus on their talents and interests, analyze the world around them, then identify opportunities to put these talents and interests to use solving problems and creating change. This mindset can be nurtured and developed, or frustrated and thwarted.

My objective in teaching entrepreneurship is to help students nurture and develop this mindset, by identifying their personal passions; spending time working on what they enjoy; improving on what they're already good at doing, rather than remediating what they're lousy at doing; putting their ideas into action; embracing failure; combining

liberal arts disciplines to solve complex problems; working on persuasive communication; collaborating; and accepting trial-and-error as a likely means to success.

Simultaneous with teaching, I started thinking about returning to journalism, first by finishing my Master's degree. I looked at my journalism prospects through an entrepreneur's lens. The industry had changed dramatically since I had left. And I had changed. My motivations for wanting to finish my degree and work as a journalist again had very little to do with employment, and everything to do with seeking the fulfillment found in writing, learning, connecting with other people, contributing to a community and working creatively toward a goal.

My three distinct careers have prepared me in myriad ways to tackle the creation of a blog. *The Riverfront Times* makes no pretense of objectivity, being a weekly alternative paper. The publisher and founder, Ray Hartmann, hired me with the mandate to write with a strong perspective -- his. Liberal, edgy and bold. An entrepreneur himself, he instilled in me the importance of targeting a niche audience of readers, writing with a strong voice, and questioning the status quo. Bloggers who have cultivated a following have done so in part by distinguishing themselves from mainstream media through strong subjective writing about subjects often ignored or given cursory treatment. Bloggers are rarely generalists. They write on a small range of subjects -- or one subject -- for a niche audience, very much like the alternative weeklies.

At Kaldi's, I immersed myself in every detail of the business, from long-range planning on brand building to the best configuration of pallet racks. When my partner and

I didn't know how to do something, we read, asked around, experimented, and found the answers. We changed and improved Kaldi's by soliciting feedback from employees and customers, building a community of loyal followers over time. The algorithm is the same for a blogger - observe, create, disseminate, market, solicit feedback, use feedback, improve. This is how a business starts and grows, no matter the industry. Starting with an idea, and the passion to execute it, and the persistence to stick with it in the face of inevitable obstacles, is fundamental to any new enterprise. A new blog has many of the same challenges as a new coffee company.

When I was tapped to teach entrepreneurship and communications at Washington University, my first thought was - I can *do*, but can I *teach*? I decided not to risk finding the answer on the job, so I asked professors I knew and admired for their personal pointers on effective teaching; I tapped the resources of The Teaching Center at Washington University for strategies; I read books about pedagogy; I consulted with the Skandalaris Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at Washington University; I even had conversations with my kids about how they were learning the art of writing and rhetoric. Self-directed instruction requires discipline, but more importantly, requires the humility to face the vast gaping holes in one's own knowledge. I get a thrill facing that huge monster. I won't have a supervisor, editor, or colleagues to lean on as a blogger. But I will use online and other sources for structured learning to improve all aspects of the blog.

• Dates and Work Schedule

I propose to launch the blog on January 3, and write my final post (for the purposes of the Professional Project) on April 11. I will work on the blog for 30 hours each week during these 14 weeks. I currently envision working from 9 am to 3 pm Monday-Friday. I work most productively with routine and structure. However, I anticipate days when I will stagger the work differently, for example, working for a few hours in the early morning, as well as frequent weekend hours. I would like to do some advance work on the blog in December, such as researching domain names and publishing trial posts, to ensure a smooth and efficient start in January.

• Description of work and dissemination

My specific work for 30 hours each week will be divided, unevenly, among the following tasks:

1. Writing and publishing at least two posts per week on my blog. I am approaching this project with the hypothesis that well-crafted content is an important component of building readership, so I anticipate writing, editing and revising these posts will be time consuming. But good blogs are updated frequently, so I will also experiment with short posts, perhaps just a photograph; a few sentences; a link to a website or blog that is relevant to the current dialogue on my blog; a re-post from another blog.

2. Building the infrastructure of the blog. This work will include registering a domain name; selecting a content management system; researching and selecting a host server, or self-hosting; adding feedback features such as comments sections; programming the blog to display well on mobile and handheld devices; as well as ongoing changes to enhance the blog's functioning.

3. Designing the look and feel of the blog, which is related to building the infrastructure of the blog, above. My goal with the design work is to establish the blog's brand and the blog's usability for the reader. When readers bother to come to the blog, I want their experience to be visually stimulating, informative, resourceful and entertaining. To that end, design details will include the aesthetics of the home page; the establishment of a blogroll which lets readers link to other blogs (on, for example, beehives, honey, parenting, family life); other site pages for beekeeping information; systems to access former posts by date and topic. Some of these tasks are once-off initial details; most are ongoing and changeable.

4. Set up a Google Analytics account. Track readership and analyze reader behavior. Formulate strategies based on findings.

5. Actively seek an audience by reading and commenting on other blogs; by using social media to draw attention to my blog; by sending links to my blog to friends and family; and by encouraging readers to share a link to my blog.

6. As a shadow substitute for an editor and/or workplace supervisor, I will work on self-directed education. Specifically, I will hone my writing, blogging, photography and business skills with online workshops, tutorials and reading.

• **Physical Evidence**

Nearly all of the work I will be doing is, by its nature, publicly available online. Much of the physical evidence of my work will remain on my blog in the form of current and archived posts. I will provide all URLs and links to other sites I participate in. If membership is necessary for viewing any of my participation on other related blogs or social media, I will page-print my contributions. I will maintain a log of my participation in related blogs and social media, as well as screen grabs and pdf prints. I will show readership and site visit tracking data by page prints of my analytics account.

I propose using readership numbers and readership participation as the two measures to assess successful completion. My Google Analytics account will provide statistics about readers, including the number of unique and repeat visits to the blog and where the readers originated (for example, they clicked on a link I posted on some other site.) The blog itself will show reader participation within the blog, such as comments. Both my analytics account and my blog will show other participation, such as clicks on social media plug-ins (for example, the Facebook “Like” button.)

My goal is to build an active audience. My first few posts will have no readers. I will have to market the blog to find readers and to encourage readers to return. I

will also have to find strategic ways to encourage comments and other forms of user participation. I will aim for continued improvement as a blogger.

ANALYSIS COMPONENT

• Prologue

When Heather Armstrong was 25, she left the Mormon Church. As a way to wallow in the freedom she felt to do the things her former religion prohibited, like date and drink tequila, she started writing a blog, *Dooce.com*. She says on her blog profile that she only expected a couple of dozen readers to find her. But, within a few months, her blog had about 58 hits a day, according to a 2011 profile by Lisa Belkin in *The New York Times*. People she didn't know read about her bold move from Mormonism, and soon she had her own little group of faithful followers who connected - through agreement and disagreement - around her new set of beliefs.

Her readers were also treated to stories about music, pop culture, her annoying colleagues, and her life as a single woman in general. Her readership grew. Today, Armstrong's blog boasts about 100,000 readers a day. (slate.com, 2012) And *Forbes* magazine ranks her as one of the most influential women in media, (Belkin, p. 42) Readers have followed her through a decade of marriage, a separation, two children, two dogs, mental illness, brushes with addiction, and the domestic minutiae that is the hallmark of the genre. (Dooce.com)

How have Armstrong and the successful women writers of this genre built their readership? While Armstrong is among an elite group of women bloggers who count daily readership in the six figures, many other women bloggers reach hundreds of readers a day. This is significant readership, considering the blog platform lacks the infrastructure -- marketing and circulation departments; established distribution channels; recognizable brands -- that traditional media have which connect journalists with readers. My research will attempt to find out what strategies bloggers have found successful in attracting readers.

• Research Topic, Questions and Definitions

While plenty of bloggers write for their own personal satisfaction, many write to be read by other people. For these bloggers, gaining an audience is a persistent challenge. The professional analysis I'm proposing will attempt to answer the question: How do bloggers attract readers? I will also pursue answers to these corollary questions: Do bloggers with strong followings actively pursue their readers? How do readers find bloggers?

For the purposes of this analysis, I will investigate readership of independent bloggers, that is, bloggers unaffiliated with a traditional media organization, company, movement or group. The challenge of attracting an audience is particularly steep for independent bloggers since they cannot tap into the automatic potential readership that bloggers who write under the auspices of a larger enterprise enjoy.

I will focus on a genre of blog I define as: Blogs authored by women, with a semi- autobiographical perspective, typically written in the first-person, with an intended female audience, on subjects that primarily but not exclusively deal with contemporary family life, careers and business, relationships, feminism, politics, current events and the environment.

Most definitions of the word “blog” in academic literature include the role of the audience. Scarborough’s research goes so far as to not not distinguish between writers and readers, defining “Mommy Bloggers” as “women who have at least one child in their household and have read or contributed to a blog in the past 30 days.” By that definition, 14 percent of all American mothers are “Mommy Bloggers.” (Scarborough, 2011) Although Scarborough’s definition is too broad to be meaningful for the purposes of this analysis, it does underscore the notion that blog writers and their readers overlap. In fact, “there is no evidence in the literature that there exist bloggers who do not read blogs.” (Sueyoshi, Tomlinson and Baumer, p. 16)

Arguably, a blog would not be a blog without readers. Researchers who study blogs often note that blog readers are so involved in establishing the theme, discussion, tone and buzz of the platform, that they are an integral part of the definition of a blog. “Readers create blogs as much as writers.” (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, p. 225) Some studies show that the essence of a blog is its ability for the blog writer to connect with the blog’s readers, primarily through allowing comments, and incorporating some comments into future posts in a meaningful way. “The interaction that occurs makes it a blog.” (Sueyoshi, Tomlinson & Baumer, p. 12)

Because my research concerns audience, I will include it in the definition of blog I'll use by adding it onto a simple definition advanced at a computer conference in 2005: A blog is a collection of "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological order." (Herring, Kouper, Paolillo, Scheidt, Tyworth, Welsch, Wright & Yu) To that concise definition I will add: A blog allows readers to post comments to the author's original content.

• **Relevance to the field and to my professional skills component**

The findings of my research could help writers connect with readers. Journalists writing for newspapers, magazines and other traditional media might be interested in using blogging as a platform for targeting a new audience, expanding their existing audience, channelling blog readers to their other publications, and increasing levels of audience engagement. Bloggers hoping that readers stumble upon their blogs would benefit from learning how to reach readers in a more systematic way. For these bloggers, the results of this analysis are particularly important, because hope is not a plan, and serendipity is not a procedure.

The professional component of my project will serve as a real-time laboratory for testing some of the ideas under consideration. I intend to write a blog in the same genre I am researching simultaneously. My goal for the professional skills component is to build an audience. I will look for opportunities during the course of my research and my professional work to weave the experiences together into a tight fabric of new insight

Publication possibilities for this professional analysis could include *New Media and Society*, *Feminist Media Studies* or *Women's Studies in Communications*.

Alternatively, I could publish the findings as blog posts on a blog that specializes in blog readership, audience building and/or marketing.

• **Theory**

The theoretical framework I will use is the Uses and Gratifications theory. The reason I'm choosing this approach is because bloggers are relatively easy to contact through their blog or email, and they know a lot about the identity and motivations of their existing readers. Online analytic tools such as Google Analytics reveal a wealth of detailed information about readers. Bloggers interested in cultivating a following can mine their analytics for data on how their current readers reached the blog (through social media, or a link from another site, for example); how long the reader stayed on the blog; how often the reader visits the blog, etc. In this way, the blogger can identify popular routes to her blog, which reveal reader motivations, and offer avenues to finding other readers.

Bloggers also know their readers because of the interactive nature of the platform. Feedback such as comments, guests posts, referrals and social media plugs reveal readers' opinions, affiliations, preferences and personality traits, as well as their motivations for reading. Additionally, blog writers are active blog readers, as previous research has shown. The Literature Review portion of this proposal discusses this research.

Analytic tools give bloggers powerful, readily available, abundant data on their readers' motivations for following their blogs. I'd like to identify these motivations, and investigate if bloggers use this data to draw in new readers and, if so, what strategies are successful.

• **Method**

The method I will use is interviewing, with a combination of questions, including open-ended questions, in order to give respondents an opportunity to relay information unprompted, as Uses and Gratifications research indicates open-ended questions capture more information about motivations for using electronic media. (James, Woltring & Forrest, 1995) I will ask about 20 questions.

I will interview 8-10 bloggers, either by phone, email, or a combination. The Literature Review which follows describes the advantages and disadvantages of phone and email in the interview method.

Target interviewees

One of the genre's top 10 most influential bloggers, (as ranked by Technorati):
Alice Brady (*Finslippy*); Amy Corbett Storch (*Amalah*); Rebecca Wolf (*Girl's Gone Child*); Monica Bielanko (*The Girl Who*); Jenny Lawson (*The Bloggess*); Catherine Connors (*Her Bad Mother*); Heather Armstrong (*Dooce*); Ree Drummond (*The Pioneer Woman*); Katherine Stone (*Post Partum Progress*); or Kate Ingalls (*Sweet Salty*)

- Three or four other bloggers who have an established blog in this genre, post regularly, and have built a following as evidenced by consistent reader comments. Examples would include Emily Matchar (*New Domesticity*); Shannon Hayes (*Shannonhayes.info*); or Hannah Mudge (*We Mixed Our Drinks*)
- One or two former bloggers, such as Stephanie Richter (*Mayonnaise Sandwich*)
- Two or three bloggers, who are also academic reserachers who have written on the subject of audience building. For example, Anita Blanchard, a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (*This That and the Mother Thing*); and Kimberly Voss, a women’s pages historian at the University of Central Florida (*Womens Page History*)
- Three or four editors at BlogHer, such as Rita Arens (Senior Editor), Melissa Ford (Blogging and Social Media Section Editor), Mona Gable (Feminism Section Editor), Grace Hwang Lynch (Section Editor of News & Politics and Race & Ethnicity sections), Jenna Hatfield (Families Section Ediror), Paula Gregorowicz (Careers Section Editor) , or Heather Clisby (Life and Green Section Editor)
- Three or four bloggers who went from blogging independently to having their blogs accepted into the BlogHer network. Examples could include: Suzanne Reisman (*CUSS and other rants*); AnnMaria Rousey de Mars (*the Julia Group*); Kelcey Kinter and Wendy Aarons (*Mouthy Housewives*)

President Barak Obama gave remarks at the most recent BlogHer Conference, in August, 2012. He said,

...like every father, I think about the role models that are out there for my daughters, and I worry about what they'll run into online, honestly, so the fact that Sasha and Malia can go to places like BlogHer and find thousands of women who are writing about subjects from health to family and food and politics and careers, it means a lot to me and it means a lot to Michelle. (Obama, p. 1)

His remarks highlight the recognition and respect that, collectively, blogs of this genre have earned in recent years.

Sample interview questions

I will ask question that will lead to dialogue about readership, audience, and uses and gratifications of blogs, such as the following:

- Are there any particular topics you write about because you've found they generate comments?
- How did you attract your readers when you first started out? What drew them in?
- What - besides time and dedication - helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

- Do you recall a time when you thought, “OK, now I’ve got a following!” like a tipping point?
- What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers or just to draw awareness to your blog?
- What was your most popular post? What is the post you’re most proud of?
- How have your posts -- and your blog overall -- changed over time?
- How has your audience changed over time?
- When you look at your analytics, are you surprised where readers came from?
- Do you change your writing and marketing based on your analytic stats?
- How do you encourage readers to return to your blog?
- Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the many other sources they could read?
- How do you choose the blogs you read? And the blogs you link to?
- What statistics on your readers from your analytics do you value the most?
- What metrics matter most to your advertisers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review of theory

The integral role the audience plays in defining the nature of a blog is the reason I chose to use the Uses and Gratifications theoretical framework. Studies show that blog writers and blog readers share many of the same motivations for choosing the medium, and seek many of the same gratifications from the medium.

Readers choose blogs over other media for convenient information, an alternative to traditional media, expression/affiliation, guidance/opinions, blog ambience, personal fulfillment, political debate, variety of opinion, and specific inquiry. (Kaye, 2010, p. 202-203) Other motivations cited in research include inspiration, entertainment and habit. (Sueyoshi, Tomlinson, Baumer, p. 10)

Research shows that bloggers write to document their life, express their opinions, release emotions, organize their thoughts and build community (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz, p. 45) They also blog to improve their writing, pass the time, and socialize. (Li, p. 15) “Bloggers record what happens to them so that they can use the events as materials for self-expression, and thus to achieve socialization with others.” (Li, p. 14)

The motivations common to both blog writers and blog readers -- seeking and expressing opinions and information, socializing and building community -- are easier to fulfill on a blog than on most other media, which is, not surprisingly, why research shows both writers and readers choose it. Bloggers select the platform because of its ability to

engage readers through immediate and ongoing feedback. “The inherent comment system of blogs integrates the feedback mechanism seamlessly into the blogging process and enables the establishment of online communities connecting bloggers with readers. Hyperlinks in post entries as well as trackbacks connect blogs on a higher level--blogs with topics in common can be connected to form a large scale community.” (Li, p. 20)

The technological aspects of the blog platform that allow users to provide feedback -- through comments, links, repostings, etc. -- motivate both the blogger and the reader to choose the medium because the feedback and the community it builds are gratifications both the blogger and the reader seek. “The interactivity between bloggers and readers as well as the interconnectivity among blogs pave the way for building topic-based or blog-centered community. Bloggers expect to meet readers who can share interests in common or exchange opinions toward certain issues.” (Li, p. 22)

It is also worth noting that Uses and Gratifications theory assumes that audiences are active participants to some degree in the consumption of media, and that participation is particularly high when the media is Web-based. The Internet “would seem to allow little passivity on the parts of its users.” (Charney and Greenberg, 2001, p. 381)

Uses and Gratifications theory is an approach well suited to an exploration of building blog readership because a blogger can use her real-time, dynamic, personalized, ongoing analytical data and reader feedback to identify why current readers use her blog, how they found the blog, and what gratifications they sought. The blogger can then apply this information to target new readers and retain existing ones.

While some bloggers write for purely personal satisfaction, (Hollenbaugh, 2010; Kayne, 2005 and 2007) typically writers on the platform today seek an audience. The quest for readers was exemplified recently by the tremendous popularity of *The Daily Telegraph's* program to allow readers to post blogs for the newspaper. Shane Richmond, Communications Editor at the Telegraph, reported in "Ours, Theirs and the Bloggers' Zones: Compatible, Yet Different," (2009) that readers enthusiastically signed up to be unpaid *Telegraph* bloggers. "The important point was not that we were giving them a blog," Richmond writes, "We were giving them an audience."

"Of course, they could create a blog with WordPress or Blogger, but then they'd spend months building an audience. With us, they could get a dozen comments from fellow readers within minutes of writing their first posts." (p. 26)

Barbara Kaye proposed a scale for measuring uses and gratifications of blogs in "Going to the Blogs: Toward the Development of a Uses and Gratifications Measurement Scale for Blogs," (2010) which followed up on her 2005 and 2007 studies of the same aim. Her investigation examined blogs of unspecified genre read by both women and men. Her findings show that blog readers are motivated by factors that are unique to blogs (p. 204-206.) She identified nine motivational factors: convenient information seeking, anti-traditional media sentiment, expression/affiliation, guidance/opinion seeking, blog ambiance, personal fulfillment, political debate, variety of opinion, and specific inquiry (p.202-203.)

One of the persistent themes in Kaye's research is that blog readers are motivated by different factors than other online media consumers. Therefore, uses and gratifications studies that examine internet usage in general, or examine other specific online resources such as websites or forums, leave some motivations undetected (p. 196-197.) "Studies have identified uses and gratifications of most Internet components," she writes, "but blogs are a relatively new resource that requires further study." (p. 196)

Other uses and gratifications research shows that motivations for using a chosen medium depend on the inherent nature of the medium: how interactive it is; how does it allow audience participation; how much activity does it grant its users. (Levy & Windahl, 1985) A blogger can control much of this activity by how she sets up her blog, and how she changes it over time in response to audience feedback.

Communications researchers have noted that while the Uses and Gratifications theory dates back to the mid 20th century, it is nevertheless appropriate for analyzing new media. As Thomas Ruggiero states in "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century," online technologies have "bolstered the theoretical potency" of the framework. (2000, p. 27.)

The components of the model are conducive to a study of how bloggers attract readers, because the model assumes a high level of reader engagement, which is a dominant feature of blog followers. In their 1973 paper "Uses and Gratifications Research," Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch identified the five core components of the model as: 1. The audience is active rather than passive.

2. The audience chooses its media. 3. Media compete with other sources of need satisfaction. 4. The audience members are capable of reporting their interest and motives to researchers. 5. Researchers should refrain from judging the “cultural significance of mass communication” choices that the audience makes. (p. 510-511.) They also posit that gratifications research should be looked at more broadly than media-related needs, into the “broader context of systematic studies of needs.” (p. 514)

Uses and Gratifications theory has proved a very dynamic framework for studying mass communications. It has been successfully applied to all forms of media, from the early days of wireless radio to contemporary internet use. (West & Turner, 2010) Even before the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory was codified, mass communications researchers identified distinct motives that attracted audiences to different media. This early research, conducted in the 1940s, resulted in lists of motives (information, advice, distraction, habit, learning, challenge, amusement, etc.) that the content, the medium, or both, provide the audience. (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973, p. 509)

The next decade brought more focus on the benefits that readers, listeners and viewers seek from media. Wilbur Schramm’s research included the study of immediate and delayed rewards on participants’ level of media gratifications. He went on to develop a mathematical formula for predicting which type of media an individual would select and how much gratification they expected from their selection, as a function of how much effort they put into the experience. (West & Turner, 2010)

Research examining the related ideas of choice, needs, satisfaction and fulfillment in media consumption continued in fields of communications and psychology for years. While much of this research used similar approaches and drew similar conclusions, the the investigators didn't forge a codified framework for their collective work. As Thomas E. Ruggerio writes in "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century:

The earliest researchers for the most part did not attempt to explore the links between the gratifications detected and the psychological or sociological origins of the needs satisfied. They often failed to search for the interrelations among the various media functions, either quantitatively or conceptually, in a manner that might have lead to the detection of the latent structure of media gratification. (p.5)

But researchers did build upon their predecessors' work as media evolved. H. Laswell identified the four functions of media in his 1948 article, "The Structure and Function of Communications Theory in Society," as surveillance, correlation, entertainment and cultural transmission. (Katz, Blumler & Gureitch, 1973, p. 512) A quarter century later, D. McQuail, J.C. Blumler and J. R. Brown added more functions to the Laswell's four after examining the motivations of television viewers. In their 1972 publication, "The television audience: a revised perspective" they added: diversion and emotional release; personal relationships, substitute companionship and social utility; personal identity and personal reference, reality exploration and value reinforcement. (Katz, Blumler & Gureitch, 1973, p. 513) The following year, Katz, Gurevitch and Haas

went on to add the concept of connectedness to the list of functions. They advanced the idea that one reason people seek out media is to connect and sometimes disconnect with other people, including friends, family or themselves. (Katz, Gurevitch and Haas, 1973)

The early Seventies brought a consolidation of the research. In 1973, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch noted a recent resurgence in research on uses and gratifications studies worldwide. They analyzed the body of related research and identified seven purposes common to all the disparate studies:

They are concerned with: **1.** The social and psychological origins of **2.** needs which generate **3.** expectations **4.** of mass media or other sources, which lead to **5.** differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in **6.** need gratifications and **7.** other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973, p. 510)

Thus Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch sharpened and expanded the Uses and Gratifications model, which allowed researchers a common platform to use in studying audience motivations. They credit two Swedish academics, D. Lundberg and O. Hulten, for coining the term “uses and gratifications” in a 1968 paper. (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973, p. 510)

Uses and Gratifications theory continues to prove a rigorous framework for analyzing media consumption today. The internet hosts many distinct platforms for audiences to choose among, and research has shown that each platform fulfills different needs and attracts different audiences for different motivations. (James, et al 1995.)

While blogs have existed since the 1990s, they are newcomers to the media landscape, and as such have not been the subject of as much research as other media. As Kaye says, “Studies have identified uses and gratifications of most Internet components but blogs are a relatively new resource that requires further study.” (2010, p. 196)

Literature Review of method

I have chosen to use the interview method, and, specifically, to include open-ended interview questions, because research has demonstrated that this method allows for a broad capture of information when applying Uses and Gratifications theory on media in general and Internet media in particular. (Ruggiero, 2000 and Kaye, 2004 & 2010)

When Charney and Greenberg conducted a broad uses and gratifications research study examining Internet use, they reasoned that participants would be able to report behaviors and relay information unprompted if they were interviewed with open-ended questions. But they also cited a more subtle reason for choosing this type of interview. They chose open-ended questions "so not to...influence the manner in which respondents thought about the subject of study" (Charney and Greenberg, p. 384).

Often, researchers use previously-identified motivations that were found to determine uses and gratifications on a similar, related medium, then use open-ended interview questions to reveal new motivations for the particular media they are studying. For example, Dimmick, Kline and Stafford used open-ended interview questions to probe the motivations behind uses and gratifications of email use. (Stafford, Kline and

Dimmick, 1999; and Dimmick, Kline and Stafford, 2000) James, Woltring and Forrest used open-ended interview questions to determine uses, motivations and behaviors of electronic bulletin-board users. (James, Woltring and Forrest, 1995) Korgaonkar and Wolin supplemented existing established uses for Internet-based media with new uses discovered through their interviews. (Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999) Bellamy and Walker uncovered how the use of remote control devices affects television using open-ended interview questions. (Bellamy and Walker, 1990) Conclusions sections in these research studies all indicate that open-ended questioning captured more information about motivations for using electronic media than other measures alone.

Kaye has published numerous papers exploring the uses and gratifications of blog users and often relies on open-ended interview questions to uncover blog participants' motivations and behaviors. She notes, "Open-ended questions may yield unique motivations that are tied to a particular medium." (Kaye, 2004, p. 6) The ongoing argument she provides for using open-ended interview questions is that blogging is a new platform, within the relatively new medium of the Internet. As such, blog writers and readers are likely to use blogs for different reasons than they'd use other media, and find different gratifications in blogs. (Kaye, 2004, 2005, 2010 & 2011) Using existing measures and closed-ended questions does't allow research participants the opportunity to reveal uses and gratifications which hadn't been previously identified nor hadn't occurred to the investigator to query.

I will question bloggers using email, telephone or both, granting them the choice of means, as research suggests that making the process convenient and controllable for the interviewee increases the likelihood of a response and the thoughtfulness of the response. (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006; Lewis and Reese, 2009; Kalve, 1996)

Both email and telephone provide respondents visual anonymity, which studies have reported “reduce self-consciousness or the ‘interviewer effect’ that is so characteristic of the face-to-face encounter.” Both also allow respondents to participate “on their own turf,” which heightens comfort thus promotes frank, lengthy replies. (Tausig and Freeman, 1988, p. 425)

Email has the advantage of less time pressure. Studies show that email gives interviewees time to reflect, and therefore they tend to give more in-depth responses. (McAuliffe, 2003) McCoyd and Kerson found that interviewees chose email over the phone because email let them respond “in small ‘chunks’ in their own time, instead of having to set aside a longer period of time during ‘normal hours.’” (p. 396) They also found email conducive to meaningful responses because subjects are “often accustomed to typing revealing communications at their computers.” (p. 397)

Bloggers, indeed, spend many hours sharing personal information electronically. While telephone interviews might seem to promote the exchange of nuanced emotion better than email, McCoyd and Kerson’s research reveals that interviewees using email nevertheless expressed emotions through language, context and emoticons. (p. 398)

Telephone offers advantages over email, notably it allows for rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. (Lewis and Reese, 2009; Kalve, 1996) Phone interviews allow the interviewer to pick up on emotions directly, as well as more subtle information conveyed through, for example, tone of voice, pauses and laughter. (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006, p. 401)

But what researchers emphasize consistently is the need for the process to be clearly stated in the final write-up, no matter how the questions were administered and the responses conveyed. Rakow discusses many types of interviews in her research, but emphasizes that the method's robustness relies on reporting the details of the process:

While no formula exists for conducting such research, if the researcher is intentional, self-reflexive, and transparent in decisions about the purpose, design, execution and interpretation of results of the project, the reviewer or reader will have the grounds to assess the value of the work. (Rakow, 2011, p. 424)

Previous research on blog readership

Kurt Greenbaum, the former online news director at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (now at Patch.com) writes in his article "If You're Not Blogging, You Should Be," that newspaper editors spend a lot of time finding an audience. "They get out there, meeting people at luncheons, speaking to community groups, answering phone calls and responding to email -- lots of email." (p. 22) He maintains that this outreach and engagement within the community is a form of blogging already, albeit "inefficient blogging," he says.

Real blogging, he reasons, is an efficient platform for drawing in new readers and keeping existing readers because it offers, through comment sections, the ongoing ability for journalists to solicit and for readers to offer dynamic, real-time feedback in one location, viewable by all.

And the more controversial the feedback, the better, when it comes to increasing readership on blogs. As Belkin notes,

Being powerful on the Internet is an odd and contrary state. “Influential” can mean strangers love you, but it is just as likely to mean that they hate you. What it really means is that they read you... When your fans and your critics tangle in the intimate anonymity of your comments section, that ups your page views...

(Belkin, p. 44)

While duking it out in cyberspace may grab attention, academic research on how bloggers attract readers offers more nuanced observations.

In Sweden, blogs written by and for women have outranked other blogs in popularity in recent years, prompting Lovheim to analyze the characteristics and content of the twenty top ranked blogs, all written by women. Her research identifies three common practices among these bloggers which attract readers: 1. The bloggers present themselves as “ordinary girls” rather than the media celebrities that they’ve actually become. 2. The bloggers challenge the conventional definitions of feminism. 3. The bloggers constantly negotiate their position in the blogosphere with their readers.

(Lovheim, 2011)

The bloggers write posts using casual, conversational, ironic and sometimes profane language to maintain their “ordinary girls” personae. (p. 9) The bloggers deftly write about their everyday life, even once they gained the fame that coincides with being a popular blogger, by focusing their writing on the concerns, pleasures, sadness, failings and problems that they share with their readers. Lovheim describes their posts as showing “the “real” or unvarnished rather than the edited version of their lives. (p. 8)

They collectively challenge the societal notions of feminism by focusing on the independence and freedom that their success has brought them. Lovheim describes posts in this category as “performance of self through the blog.” (p. 12) Thus it’s the perspective the bloggers choose in their writing that underscores their counter-culture views.

The way the bloggers negotiate their position with their readers is direct. They ask their readers to weigh in on offers they’ve received for advertising revenue, network affiliations, and other forms of compensation that might turn some readers off for fear of losing the intimacy they’ve established. For example, Lovheim relates a post one woman wrote after receiving an offer to publish her post elsewhere. “...And then I wonder about one thing: Would you come with me if I and the blog moved?” By bringing her readers into her decision, this post “illustrates the ambivalence of embracing the commercial possibilities of becoming a top-blogger” Lovheim says, while also keeping readers feeling enfranchised in the process, and therefore loyal to the writer. (p. 11)

Lovheim also notes some common technical characteristics of these top-ranked blogs which, she reasons, contributes to their ability attract readers. These blogs are more frequently updated than other blogs, fourteen of the twenty posting more than twice per day, five posting more than five times a day. They also actively engage readers in their comments section, with seventeen of the bloggers receiving between 50-100 comments per day, and one blogger receiving 825 comments on one post. (p. 6) They not only encourage comments, they encourage readers to post questions. Then, they present selected questions and answers on their blogs. (p. 11)

While it's unlikely that bloggers enjoy an international following, it is likely that what works for bloggers in Sweden would work for bloggers in other countries. To the extent that reading habits and blog usage possess some universal attributes, it's likely that the techniques for attracting readers that Lovheim's research uncovers are applicable in other countries.

Indeed, Lopez analyzes the form and content of women-authored blogs in the U.S. through the lenses of feminism and autobiography in her 2009 article, "The Radical Act of Mommy Blogging." Just as the Swedish bloggers challenge the conventions of feminism in their posts, Lopez describes the fiery debates among women bloggers and their readers over the definitions of motherhood, the appropriateness of writing about domestic issues, and their mission to overcome marginalization in the blogosphere's marketplace of ideas. (p. 729-731)

Her other findings on top-ranked American bloggers were aligned with Lovheim's observations of their Swedish counterparts: Bloggers reach readers by identifying with their common problems, pleasures, concerns, and feelings as women. "Instead of writing for one's own satisfaction and record-keeping, bloggers deliberately craft their narratives so that others can recognize their similarities and shared interests." (p. 744) Like Swedish bloggers who negotiate their position in the blogosphere with their readers, top-ranked American bloggers openly discuss proposals from media companies and advertising agencies that they are considering, and publish both supportive and angry readers' opinions on the subject. (p. 741)

Relating to readers through shared experiences is a way to establish trust and believability. Other research suggests that readers won't stick with media they don't find credible. In her cluster analysis of blog credibility, Kaye establishes that credibility is a factor necessary for a source's long-term success, and that "because people do not judge a source as credible unless it satisfies their needs, credibility is also linked to the uses and gratifications perspective." (p. 237)

Kaye assesses blog credibility by asking readers to judge the believability, accuracy, fairness and depth of seven different blog genres followed, including personal blogs. Her findings show that readers judged all genres as highly credible. (p. 256)

Blanchard argues that blogs can take the form of a "virtual community," which fosters loyalty among blog participants. Through a case study of the "Julie/Julia Project" blog, Blanchard finds that bloggers who build and maintain a "virtual community" are

able attract loyal readers. Blanchard makes the distinction between “virtual communities” and their more fragile counterparts “virtual groups.” Communities are characterized by its members’ shared feelings of belonging, identity and influence; by an integration and fulfillment of needs; and by shared emotional connection. “A virtual community, therefore, is more likely to be self- sustaining than a regular virtual group, and sustainability is a goal important to both for the sponsors and the participants of any particular virtual group,” she observes. Her case study demonstrates that some blogs offer these characteristics of community, which contributes to the building and sustaining of readers. (Blanchard, 2004) She notes the two most effective ways bloggers establish this “virtual community” are rigorous use of the comments and blogroll functions of their blogs. The interaction of blog authors and blog readers instill blogs with a sense of community. When blog authors make reference in their posts to specific communication they’ve had with readers --e-mail exchanges or comments--they foster a virtual community by publicly opening up the dialogue to the rest of the participants. This is important because it helps maintain readership. “When participants experience feelings of community, they are more likely to increase or maintain their participation in the virtual communities.” Blogrolls are lists of blogs that the blogger frequently reads and therefore chooses to showcase by linking them on the main page of her blog, thus encouraging her readers to click on the links and visit them. This creates a network of interconnected blogs, with overlapping readers, topics and dialogue. (Blanchard, 2004)

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My project deviated from my proposal in two ways.

1. In my proposal, I state that I will interview one of the genre's top "Most Influential Mom Bloggers," as ranked by Technorati, an Internet search engine for blogs. Technorati no longer ranks Mom Blogs separately from other blogs. Babble.com, however, ranks Mom Blogs annually in their Top 100 Mom Blogs index. Babble's ranking is cited on blogs within this genre as having rigor and prestige. The top ranked bloggers I interviewed came from Babble's most recent list, published in December, 2012.
2. In my proposal, I state I will ask interviewees about 20 questions. Instead I asked them about 12. After the first two interviews I conducted, I found asking fewer questions encouraged respondents to answer each question in more detail. I think the idea of 20 questions overwhelmed them. Additionally, the last question I asked was an open-ended one, asking for any of their own unspecified insights about audience building. Their responses often encompassed answers to the questions I had cut from my list.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Stephanie Sprenger, *Mommy for Real*

1/22/2013 via telephone

How did you attract readers when you first started out? What drew them in?

I think I was very naive when I first started blogging. I thought I'd get just moms looking for something to read with shared interests. That's now how it works. I had to read other blogs and comment on them to get readers. I still do. A lot. At least half your readers are other bloggers. They read you, so you read them. It's a very supportive community.

You assume that you'll write something and then people will find you and read you because what you write is so great and interesting. You assume your readers are regular people but they're not. They are other bloggers. It's like writers only being read by other writers.

My life would be easier if I had 8,000 readers who are inspired or entertained by what I write. But that's not the case. You have to read other bloggers to be read. It's really very time consuming. If I'm not reaching out to other bloggers, I'm not getting readers. Not that a blogger is a reader you don't want. My blogging life changed when my friend Kate (Kate Hall) introduced me to other bloggers. (Kate Hall writes a blog, *Can I Get Another Bottle of Whine*.)

But it would be so much easier to be a famous blogger who doesn't need to do all this work reading and commenting on other blogs. Someone like (Susan McLean) *Divine Secrets of A Domestic Diva*. Bloggers like her, they don't need to comment.

Besides reading other bloggers when you started your blog, did you deliberately work to attract an audience?

When I started my blog, it wasn't just to have a blog. I wanted to do freelance writing. It was a way to develop and show my work. I wanted notches on my belt. So I sought out networks like Mamapedia and Blog Her and did a lot of submissions of posts to get a readership. They make it easy. I submitted at least 3-4 posts before I heard back from BlogHer.

I pick the pieces I am most proud of, and the ones that I think will resonate the most with readers. When they accepted a piece, I felt like I got a foot in the door.

The other place I have submitted is called The Power of Moms. It's more inspirational themed blogs. I'm the black sheep of the inspirational community. I swear they've featured three of my pieces because I'm the black sheep.

Mamapedia is a great way to gain readers. 70,000 people get their email subscription. I get a surge of readers when they publish one of my posts. It's hard to say if that translates directly into new email subscribers on my blog. With BlogHer, I got more Facebook Likes and Twitter responses. But BlogHer definitely brought me the biggest reader draw.

What--besides time and dedication--helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

I have a friend who teaches social media at Northwestern University. I posted about my blog on my personal Facebook page. I got some people regularly following me-- family and friends. My friend told me to get a Facebook page for my blog. He also told me to spend \$30 to pay for a Facebook ad. Within 2 weeks I got 400 Facebook fans from running the ad for a couple of weeks.

I also ran an ad on a famous blogger's blog, *Let me Start by Saying*, by Kim Bongiorno. You can take out an ad on an established blogger's site. That brought me some readers.

Blog Hops and Link Ups also work. You join a group of bloggers and on a certain day of the week you write about the same theme. I do a Monday Listicles Blog Hop. Everyone writes a "Top Ten" list on the same subject. Then you hop around and read each others' posts and comment on them. This has been a great way for me to get other bloggers reading me. I've met others who resonate with me and we support each other.

What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers, encourage repeat visits, or just draw awareness to your blog?

Blogger awards are a good way to get other bloggers to read you. They boost your ego, and they feel so good. But really, it's kind of like a chain letter. Bloggers pass them around among themselves.

I had 3 people give me awards this week. (Versatile Blogger, Leibster and Beautiful Blogger Awards.) Then I in turn find other people to award. I try to find blogs that show good work, bloggers that deserve recognition for what they are writing about, how they are writing. So there is a fair amount of blog reading involved in the awarding process. Let's be honest, there are a lot of bad blogs out there.

Bloggers have an incentive to have the awards mean something. My home page will always show that I got these awards. When you pass an award onto someone, you acknowledge that you recognize their talent.

What marketing activities do you think are the most fruitful in attracting readers?

Submitting pieces wherever I can. And social media - Facebook, Twitter.

Twitter is so different than Facebook. Half my readers are on Facebook, half are on Twitter. A lot of people really like one more than the other. More of my normal, non-blogging readers are on Facebook. My bloggers followers are on Twitter. Twitter is really great, because you can tweet other things about your life that are related to your blog things. A third of your tweets promote yourself. A third should re-tweet a link to another blogger. And a third should promote your personal brand, so you'd tweet something like, "Both my children are simultaneously peeing on the carpet."

Despite my initial hesitations, Twitter has been great.

How has your blog changed over time?

I recently switched my blog to WordPress, because there are so many perks to blogging on WordPress.

What was your most popular post? The post you are most proud of?

I wrote a post called *Heartbreak and the Young Entrepreneur*. It's being published in an anthology this month called "Anything Prose and Poetry too!"

I wasn't able to find that post in your archives.

There is a 1 year embargo on the work that will be in the book.

How do you keep readers returning to your blog?

I do everything with my blog persona, who I am on Mommy for Real. All my social media, all my posts. But that's who I am. I represent myself when I blog. The people who do read me keep coming back because I am authentic. I keep writing about my kids, our life. It's like watching TV. You tune in again to see what's happening.

I also think people come back to my blog because I put in the effort to interact with them on their blog regularly.

Do you recall a time when you thought, "OK, now I've got a following!" like a tipping point?

Facebook ad really helped me connect with other bloggers and other readers. I also gained a lot of readers whenever one of my posts was featured on Mamapedia or other places. You can gain a lot of other readers that way.

Do you track your analytics, and, if so, what metrics matter most to you? Do you know where your readers come from through analytics?

I never went through all of that hoopla. I didn't know how many email subscribers I had. Now that I use WordPress, I just look at my Dashboard. With WordPress, it's all there. One reader reached out to me in my comments section, and now we follow each other. I know most of my readers who are other bloggers. We know each other through our blogs.

If I get 200 page views a day, that's a really big deal. 450 is my all time high.

What metrics about your blog matter most to your advertisers?

I don't have advertisers. Most bloggers don't. One woman, who I consider a successful blogger, I think told me she's made \$45 to date.

BlogHer has a publishing network that I have applied to be a part of. That's a bigger deal than having them publish one of your posts. Within their network, if you are accepted in it, you're also part of their ad network. I will re-apply again in awhile. They

didn't accept me when I applied, and you have to wait to reapply again. There's only so many times you can apply with a certain amount of time. Still I'd be curious to know how much money the typical blogger gets.

Other insights about building blog audience you'd like to share?

Really, blogging isn't about making money directly through advertising on your blog. Blogging is a way to establish yourself as a brand. For me, I want my blog to lead me to other writing opportunities. It's a way of making myself more known as a writer. Because there's a lot of guilt I have about the time I spend blogging. I need to clean my house. It would be nice to exercise. But I blog because I think it's a way to build my brand as a writer. I'm hoping for that at least.

Kimberly Voss, *Women's Page History*

1/30/13 via email

Note: In addition to asking her questions about her blog, I asked Voss questions I didn't ask other bloggers to get her historical perspective on women readers, as the subject is related to her academic specialty.

Women's pages were deliberately eliminated from newspapers. But blogs written by women, for women, overwhelmingly deal with the same topics that the women's page sections did: food, fashion, home, family. In your opinion, is there a resurgence in interest on the part of today's women readers for these subjects? Or was the interest always there, and just went unmet for awhile?

Women's magazines filled the void left by the end of the women's pages by the 1970s. While there has been an increase in women's blogs, there is not necessarily the mix of hard & soft news, nor the localization that newspaper women's pages provided. Most blogs lack the research or reporting aspects that the women's pages provided. My commentary on the Ms Blog about the women's pages:

<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/07/19/hey-dont-knock-the-womens-pages/>

<https://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/01/18/why-womens-sections-like-broadsheet-matter/>

What were the primary reasons women's pages were eliminated, or folded into "lifestyle" sections?

The women's pages were renamed "lifestyle" sections in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Ben Bradlee gets most of the credit for creating the Style section at the Washington Post but other newspapers were already transitioning away from women's sections at the same time – such as the St. Pete Times/Evening Independent and the Louisville Courier-Journal. In large part the change was made due to the leaders in the Women's Liberation Movement who felt the sections were "ghettos." They felt that women's news should be throughout the newspaper. It was a great idea in theory but it never happened in practice. Gloria Steinem was one of the most vocal critics. Several years later she admitted that she was wrong about the value of the women's pages – of course by that time it was too late.

What does your research on women's pages reveal about strategies that editors and journalists used to attract readers?

Most women's pages had a strong local connection to readers so they did not need to do much to attract readers. There were two activities that often tied the women's pages. The first was a publicity training session for women's club leaders. In these sessions, the editors would explain what made news – such as having a significant speaker at a meeting. The second was about recipes. There were recipe exchanges and competitions – lots of direct dialogue between journalists and readers.

In your opinion, what is the most interesting aspect(s) of women bloggers and their ability to attract readers and advertisers?

I don't have much knowledge in this area. I come from the old form of journalism where editorial & advertising never mixed.

What motivates readers of women's blogs? Could these readers find the information from other media?

My guess is that there is a friendliness, a personal connection in blogs that does not exist the same way in other media.

Do you read blogs written by women, for women? If so, do you participate by writing comments, or in other ways?

I have written guest blog posts for The Feminist Kitchen and the Ms Blog but I am not as active as I probably should be with comments other than FB.

Do women "consume" media differently than men?

I don't know if there is a difference in media consumption but I do think that there is a difference on the production side. When polled, men and women rank the importance of some topics differently. Topics like domestic violence, maternity rights and pay inequity don't rank as highly for male gatekeepers. In terms of social media, I am curious to see where Pinterest takes us as it is portrayed as gendered. Here is some of my writing about it: <http://thefeministkitchen.com/2012/10/22/guest-post-fashion-food-and-feminism-on-pinterest/>

Do women have communication needs they seek to fulfill with media that are exclusive to their gender?

I think that programs like Women's Enews and the Women's Media Center prove that topics that women are interested in are not being covered by the mainstream media.

How do you, as a blogger, encourage readers to use your blog, both initially and as returning readers?

I use Facebook & Twitter to send out new posts but I haven't been concerned about returning readers.

Do you use analytics (Google analytics; Hoot Suite)? If so, what metrics matter most to you?

I do pay attention to analytics in terms of which topics are most read about and am more likely to blog about those topics again.

Any other thoughts, comments?

Anita Blanchard, *This, That and the Mother Thing*
2/8/13 via telephone

How did you attract readers when you started writing your blog?

I really wanted to have readers. I couldn't tell if anyone was reading my blog or not. I was anxious. I remember when I got my first comment, I was thrilled about it. I had been named one of Salon.com's Top Sites of the Day. I told my friends and family about my blog. When I searched for myself, I wondered why my blog never came up. There was some sort of problem. I don't know what it was. I think I had it hidden or something. I had to unhide it. Anyway, it took awhile to show up on Google. But it did, and I started to get hits. I was shocked. Salon doesn't do this listing anymore. But the did, and we were on there, a lot of us, for awhile.

I wrote about my difficulties getting pregnant. I wrote about whatever I was doing to get pregnant, and thinking about. I was also reading and commenting on other people's blogs. People writing about fertility issues. I used a blogroll. A lot of bloggers did. They'd see your work and link to you. I linked to Julie Powell (*Julie/Julia Project Blog*), *Dooce*, *Here Be Hippogriffs*, *A little Pregnant*.

In your experience as Mom Blogger, how do writers and readers find each other?

Now, there are are so many blogs. People really have to be a good writer to get readers. I can't stand reading so much of what's out there. It's essential to be a good writer to get people to read your stuff. And you have to write about things people can relate to.

You have to post regularly. At least one time a week.

What, besides time and dedication and reading/comment on other blogs, helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

By writing honest information about important events. Events that other people in the same situation wonder about or have to face. Like miscarriage, fertility medications.

How has your blog changed over time?

People who read me now aren't necessarily trying to get pregnant. But that has changed over time. They were at first.

What was your most popular post? The post you are most proud of?

I wrote a post about IVF versus adoption. It was a decision we had to make, and one a lot of people have to make. If you Googled IVF vs. adoption, my post was the first thing you'd see. It still pops up, and we made our decision 5 years ago! It still gets several hits a day.

Another one was a post I wrote about what are beta values for twins. “Do my beta levels or my progesterone levels make it seem like I’m having twins.” It was fertility and pregnancy information that readers wanted to discuss and know about in more detail than they could with their doctors or elsewhere. It was a chance to have a conversation.

How do you keep readers returning to your blog?

People come online now and they can catch up with my family and my kids. They know what we went through to have kids. The autobiographical nature of blogs makes people return. Readers want to hear your life story.

What kind of marketing activities do you do now to attract readers?

Not as much as I should. Social media: Facebook and Twitter. Facebook draws the most readers. 10-20% of Facebook folks click over to the blog. But with Twitter, only occasionally will people click through to read the blog. Right now, I look at people’s posts on Pinterest. I’m on the consuming end of Pinterest, not the creating end.

Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the may other sources they could read?

I hope its because I write useful information told through a good story. I provide the same medical and research information that they can find somewhere else, but it’s told within my story. It’s a personal experience. It’s written in a way people can understand it. I explain what I’m going through and they can get it, or relate to it. Plus, I try to be funny.

Why do you read blogs? How do you choose the ones you read?

Blogs give you a an idea that you are not alone in this process. Other women are going through this. Motherhood is so isolating. For working mothers I think it’s even worse, because they don’t have a chance to hang out with other moms while they’re at work. Reading blogs makes me realize, “I’m not insane! I don’t have it as bad as I think I do.” Also, you build relationships with the women whose stories you read. (The women who write the blogs) Dooce, and Hippogriffs, I worry about them. I hope they’re doing ok. It’s a way of not being isolated in a world that can be isolating.

It’s a nice break. It’s entertaining. We don’t have Erma Bombeck anymore.

What analytics matter most to you?

I don’t use Google analytics. I use a site meter. That’s all I really look at.

Do you solicit advertising?

No.

What other insights can you share about Mom Blogs and readers?

I started my blog because I had to write. I had to get out all the anxiety that was going on inside me. There is a great deal of research showing that writing is therapeutic. Other research shows that writing forces people to dwell on their problems. I dwell on problems until I write about them.

Melissa Ford, *Stirrup Queens*
2/15/13, via email

Are there any particular topics you write about because you've found they generate comments?

No, I just write about what I want to write about in the moment. What I need to say.

How did you attract your readers when you first started out? What drew them in?

I read and commented on other people's blogs, and that's mostly how people found me. Back in 2006, the blogosphere was much smaller and I think we mostly found each other through comments. Now, there are dozens of ways to find people, but the blogosphere is also much larger.

What - besides time and dedication - helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

I think simply time and continuing to blog ARE the reasons the blog grew.

What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers or just to draw awareness to your blog?

I don't. Sorry -- I'm not sure I'm the best person for your study.

Of these marketing activities, which is/are the most fruitful in attracting readers?

N/A

How have your posts -- and your blog overall -- changed over time?

I'm sure my voice has changed in the same way that I don't speak as I did when I was a high schooler or a twenty-something. But I think that my blog has remained pretty slow and steady. I still post the same amount.

How has your audience changed over time?

The individual people have changed and certainly, the audience has grown. But overall, it's the same supportive community in 2013 as it was in 2006.

Do you change your writing and marketing based on your analytic stats? What stats are your advertisers most interested in?

N/A

How do you encourage readers to return to your blog?

I just continue to write. And they continue to come.

Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the many other sources they could read?

I'm not sure. That's sort of like asking why did my friends choose to be friends with me over all the other possible women in this town? They chose me because we connected.

Other insights you'd like to share about how to attract readers?

Be yourself. Enjoy your own blog. Enjoy writing it and re-reading it.

Shannon Hayes, Shannon Hayes Info
2/22/13, via email

Are there any particular topics you write about because you've found they generate comments?

I've noticed that some topics tend to generate more comments than others, but I don't choose my topics in order to generate comments. I follow my gut and creative instincts for the "Tuesday Post," which is the long, essay-length post that I do each week. I've noticed that even if I pick a topic that doesn't generate a lot of comments, I still get an email or a posted comment from at least one or two individuals who say something like "you have no idea how much I needed to read this today...." So I follow my gut and trust that there is at least one reader who will need whatever Tuesday Post I am generating. There are days when I reach lots of folks, and days when I am speaking to just one. Both matter.

How did you attract your readers when you first started out? What drew them in?

I had written a book called "Radical Homemakers," and I acquired the domain name and started a wordpress site for it. I had a number of folks sign up w/their email addresses for regular Radical Homemakers updates, but I was never able to manage the site. So when I switched to my personal website and blog, I sifted through that email list, sorted out the spam, and then sent an email to the remaining names. I told them they would be getting one weekly email on blog updates, but they could opt out at that point (or any point) with an unsubscribe link. That was my first core group.

What - besides time and dedication - helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

I'm never really sure. I think some folks find me because of books that I've written, other folks get my posts forwarded to them by friends and family, and some of the posts are re-posted on other sites. I put up a link for each post on Facebook, and tweeter, so people can "retweet" or "share," and I think that probably brings in the most new readers (but this is just a guess).

A lot of my stuff is re-posted for Yes! Magazine's blog, but I don't think the readers there hunt down my personal website and become readers. I think they just keep following me on Yes!

Do you recall a time when you thought, "OK, now I've got a following!" like a tipping point?

I'm still not certain that I even have a following.

What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers, encourage repeat visits, or just to draw awareness to your blog?

I faithfully put up the Tuesday Post, an in-depth essay, each week. The other 4 weekdays I put up one image from our daily life, and a brief comment. Other than that, I just put links to the post once a day on FB and Twitter.

Of these marketing activities, which is/are the most fruitful in attracting readers?

I think just being consistent with up-to-date posts and essays.

What was your most popular post? What is the post you're most proud of?

How have your posts -- and your blog overall -- changed over time?

I began this blog in Nov of 2011, not really knowing what to do. First I did a post per week, then I settled in for the creative challenge of generating one essay per week. Last September I switched to doing short daily posts w/pics on weekdays, with the long post on Tuesday. That seemed to cause the single greatest jump in weekly visits.

How has your audience changed over time?

I don't get the sense of a changing audience. A lot of the comment names have become familiar to me. My weekly traffic has increased, however, from 50-200 when I started, to about 1200-1500 presently.

Do you use analytics, and, if so, do they indicate that your readers come from any particular source(s)?

I can't figure out how to use analytics, and if I did, I might spend all my time thinking about that, rather than trying to generate good quality writing.

Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the many other sources they could read?

I don't think my readers come to me for "information," per say. I think they are a rather unconventional set. The average length of a visit on my blog is longer than normal, I think. My Tuesday post takes about 4-5 minutes to read, longer if you are reading and participating in comments. (The other weekday posts are much less time-consuming.) I believe that my readers are not normal browsers, but are instead coming to me because they really want to think about the topics I'm discussing. They are looking for inspiration to continue on a sustainable life path, and they seem eager to read about my thoughts and experiences on this path.

How do you choose the blogs you read? And the blogs you link to?

I try to spend as little time on the computer as possible, and I am embarrassed to admit that I don't read other blogs, and my website is so rudimentary, I don't have a page

allowance where I could link to others. I've seen Amanda Soule's (soulemama.com) blog, and hers is just dazzling. Wish I could pull that off...but I'd make myself crazy trying.

What metrics about your blog matter most to your advertisers?

My readers would be very unhappy if I had advertising on my site, other than for the fruits of my own labor.

Alise Wright, *Alise... Write!*
3/2/13, via email

Are there any particular topics you write about because you've found they generate comments?

I find that when I write about my interfaith marriage, that tends to generate more comments. The more personal I get, the more comments I get because people feel like they are able to be more honest as well.

How did you attract your readers when you first started out? What drew them in?

I started being more intentional about blogging and wrote every day. In the beginning, I found that writing consistently and honestly was key. Also, participating in the blogging community at large was important. Commenting on other blogs with similar audiences helped me to grow my own blog.

What - besides time and dedication - helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

As I mentioned before, commenting elsewhere was helpful. But I was also lucky enough to be invited to guest post for a couple of popular bloggers and that helped me grow my audience significantly.

Do you recall a time when you thought, "OK, now I've got a following!" like a tipping point?

When I realized that I was being linked to by bloggers who I had admired for a long time and realized, "Oh, they admire me BACK."

What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers or just to draw awareness to your blog?

I still try to guest post occasionally to get my name out to audiences who don't know me. I also use social media (particularly Facebook & Twitter) to draw attention to any new posts.

Of these marketing activities, which is/are the most fruitful in attracting readers?

I find that most of my traffic comes from Facebook. But Twitter is gaining.

What was your most popular post? What is the post you're most proud of?

My most popular piece was one that I wrote after the Chik-fil-A event last summer. It was shared extensively and drew a lot of visitors to my site. But my favorite piece is one that I wrote a few months ago about why my husband and I chose to stay in our mixed faith marriage. There's nothing controversial about it, it's basically just a love-letter to my husband. But I think the writing in it is really tight and I love it.

How have your posts -- and your blog overall -- changed over time?

When I first started writing, it was mostly just to chronicle what was going on with my family (especially my kids) and in my mind. As my kids got older and I wanted to protect their privacy more, I started writing just about what I was thinking. I'm still working to bring more focus to my blog.

How has your audience changed over time?

Originally it was just my family and a couple of internet friends. Now I don't know most of the people who visit my blog.

When you look at your analytics, are you surprised where readers came from?

Sometimes! Every now and again something will be picked up by a blog I'm not familiar with and it always surprises me.

Do you change your writing and marketing based on your analytic stats?

Not generally. If a particular topic seems to be more popular, I will write about it again, but I find that my time is better spent working on improving the marketing that I have in place rather than trying to work some new system.

How do you encourage readers to return to your blog?

I have done series in the past (and am starting a new one). Those help people want to come back. I also interact regularly with my readers in the comments and on social media. We have established a kind of community and people want to participate in their community.

Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the many other sources they could read?

I think that I present the same information in a different way. My tone is very conversational and that makes people feel like they know me. And as I said before, I interact with my readers, which I think makes them feel special.

How do you choose the blogs you read? And the blogs you link to?

I read blogs that write very differently than I do, for the most part. I like poetic writing, so most of the blogs that I read fall along those lines. I link to all kinds of things, but mostly blogs of similar interest to what my readers get from me.

What statistics on your readers from your analytics to you value the most?

I like to know what topics move people to share my work with others, so I'll watch number of shares steadily. Hits are great, but when people spread my work with their friends, that matters much more to me.

What metrics matter most to your advertisers?

Page views, pure and simple.

Other insights you'd like to share about how to attract readers?

Know that it takes time and will likely never be enough. I am still working to attract more readers to help with publishing pursuits and while my analytics are good, there are still gaps that I'm trying to fill. Generosity and honesty are important.

Rita Arens, *Surrender, Dorothy*
3/5/13, via email

Are there any particular topics you write about because you've found they generate comments?

The less serious the post, the more comments I get. My blog has never been a huge comment blog, though, so I don't really count them. In the past year I have been making a bigger effort to respond to comments than I did in the past, though.

How did you attract your readers when you first started out? What drew them in?

I started in 2004, and the way you got readers then was to read other blogs like yours and comment on their blogs, then they would come read your blog. The blogosphere was smaller and very reciprocal. Also back then, Technorati was very big. And being on people's blogrolls. Blogrolls have all but disappeared in the wake of social media, which is the way to get readers now.

What - besides time and dedication - helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

Early adoption. I was a fairly early blogger, an early speaker at blogging conferences, an early tweeter, etc. If you get in and get followers before the technology tips over into the mainstream, it's easier.

Do you recall a time when you thought, "OK, now I've got a following!" like a tipping point?

I remember standing up to ask a question at a blogging conference and when I introduced myself, someone made an excited noise. Okay, I'll call it a squee. Thankfully, my sister was there to witness it. Best. Moment. Ever.

What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers or just to draw awareness to your blog?

I share my blog posts on Twitter and that autoshares to Facebook. I still comment on other peoples' blogs. I blog on BlogHer, where I'm a senior editor. I promote other people's work. It's more about increasing awareness of me as a writer than it is about my blog now that I have a parenting anthology and a young adult novel out in the world.

Of these marketing activities, which is/are the most fruitful in attracting readers?

I am actually not sure because I don't analyze my referrers.

What was your most popular post? What is the post you're most proud of?

The post I'm most proud of is also my most popular post: How Dr. Phil Got Anorexia Wrong: http://surrenderdorothy.typepad.com/surrender_dorothy/2010/10/how-dr-phil-got-anorexia-wrong.html I wrote it years ago and people still email me about it.

How have your posts -- and your blog overall -- changed over time?

I started out as an anonymous mommyblogger on maternity leave. Now I write about parenting, politics, religion, publishing, healthcare, humor, work – pretty much everything but genre stuff like recipes or crafts. I write most about writing itself.

How has your audience changed over time?

I am not really sure. Since so few people comment, I'm never really sure who is reading my blog.

How do you encourage readers to return to your blog?

I try to write in a variety of styles so there's something for everyone.

Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the many other sources they could read?

You're not going to find very many facts or news stories on my blog. The only reason I can imagine anyone would read Surrender, Dorothy is because they like my voice.

How do you choose the blogs you read? And the blogs you link to?

I read my friends' blogs as often as I can, but mostly I read things I'm referred to by people I respect. I'll click on links people share on Twitter or Facebook or email me about. I link to people who had something interesting to say or to back up a statement of fact.

Do you change your writing and marketing based on your analytic stats?

No. It's not that kind of blog. I made a conscious decision a few years ago to focus on my career as a writer and not on my career as a blogger.

What statistics on your readers from your analytics to you value the most?

I like to see where people are from, though I used to have a widget that told me that and now I can't tell unless I actually log in to Google analytics, which I almost never do.

What metrics matter most to your advertisers?

I use the BlogHer Publishing Network, so you'd have to ask them.

Other insights you'd like to share about how to attract readers?

Really be a good member of the community – don't always talk about yourself. People hate that.

Alexandra Rosas, *Good Day Regular People*
3/12/13, via email

Are there any particular topics you write about because you've found they generate comments?

No. I truly write as an exercise for writing growth, and the community I've found has been a wonderful, amazing incidental benefit.

How did you attract your readers when you first started out? What drew them in?

I visited other blogs, and they'd visit back. That is the way to begin to accrue a following.

What - besides time and dedication - helped you grow your audience from your inner circle to an international community?

Time and dedication are the only thing. TIME.

Do you recall a time when you thought, "OK, now I've got a following!" like a tipping point?

No. Never. I still don't feel that way.

What types of marketing activities do you routinely do now to attract readers or just to draw awareness to your blog?

None. I'm not into marketing. Never will be.

Of these marketing activities, which is/are the most fruitful in attracting readers?

Not applicable.

What was your most popular post? What is the post you're most proud of?

The one that catapulted me to Voice of The Year for Humor, "When You Love A Blogger."

How have your posts -- and your blog overall -- changed over time?

My friendships have blossomed into just that. My readership has declined but my connections are sincere, not surface.

How has your audience changed over time?

I have friends now, no longer blogging relationships.

How do you encourage readers to return to your blog?

By taking an interest in their lives and the comments they leave. By thanking them for their visit.

Why would readers choose to read your blog for information rather than the many other sources they could read?

I'm sorry,my blog has no information. I just write.

How do you choose the blogs you read? And the blogs you link to?

I link to blogs that I know would inspire my readers. I read the blogs that inspire me.

Do you change your writing and marketing based on your analytic stats?

I don't have stats.

What statistics on your readers from your analytics to you value the most?

I don't follow statistics.

What metrics matter most to your advertisers?

I belong to a publishing network, and they follow my stats.

Other insights you'd like to share about how to attract readers?

Sincerity is tantamount. People can smell rotten cheese.

Stephanie Richter, *Mayonnaise Sandwich*
3/15/13, via telephone

Why did you start writing your Mommy Blog?

We were on a sabbatical for a year, and I found I was sending these crazy-long emails to my friends and family about what we were doing. I thought I was being presumptuous assuming they would read them. I liked the idea of a blog because the audience can choose to read it, or not.

Were you aware that you had an audience outside your inner circle of family and friends?

Yeah! After about 4 or 5 posts, I was aware I had an audience. I liked writing the posts, but I really had no idea who was reading the blog, until I attached a counter to it. That's when I realized how many people were reading.

I was thrilled when people let me know, somehow, whether via Facebook or by emailing me directly or whatever, that they read me.

Did you use any analytic tools to track who your readers were?

Not really. I was never very interested in keeping count of my readers. I didn't pay attention to how many readers I had. But I liked trying to figure out how they found me. Who told someone in Minnesota to visit me? It was flattering, and very motivating.

How did readers find you?

I always felt weird when someone I didn't know read me. I don't really know how I got readers in Norway. All I can guess is that it was word-of-mouth from when I took Swedish post-doc students on a tour in Mississippi.

Word-of-mouth accounted for most of the readers whom I didn't know. My mom recommended me to her friends

Did you participate in other Mommy Blogs? Did you use a blogroll?

Oh yeah. I put links on my blogs to other bloggers whom I enjoyed reading, either because they made me happy, or because they were my friends. My friend Adrienne Martini writes a blog called *martinimade* that is fabulous. She linked to me. It's like unspoken blog etiquette that you link to writers who link to you.

Did you market your blog to find readers?

I put a link to my blog on my Facebook page. My sorority sisters linked to me from their Facebook pages. Some reader found me and asked if he could friend me on Facebook, and his friends read me.

I never marketed directly to readers, or potential readers. I wanted readers to come by choice. I never wanted to force myself on anyone. I didn't think I was anything special. I wanted people to choose.

Did you use other marketing tactics? Did you ever use Twitter?

No. Twitter never worked for me. I can't be funny in 140 characters or less.

Why did you stop blogging?

I stopped blogging when my mother moved in with us. It was awful. I became depressed. Definitely situational depression. I wasn't finding humor in anything in my life, except making fun of my mother. And I couldn't do that. I no longer felt the freedom to write, so I stopped writing. I have thought I would blog again. Things are really fine now with her.

Why do you read blogs? How do you choose the blogs you read?

I've been a blog reader for years. There are primarily two different categories of blogs I read: blogs written by moms that kind of laugh at their kids; and blogs about upcycling, like how to make a birdcage out of an old combat boot. My favorite ones in these categories are *Snarky in the Suburbs*, *Rage Against the Minivan*, *Deep Fried Kudzu*.

But I also use blogs for information on food, household stuff and travel. I get all my recipes from blogs. I go to blogs for gardening and household tips. And I always read blogs for travel research. This summer we are going to Italy. I found bloggers who write in English but live in Rome. I follow them. They write about stuff that would never show up on any website. This is how I found out about Gladiator Camp for my kids. Commercial sites, like Fodor's, aren't as helpful with precise information. And I suspect they get kickbacks.

Are there any particular topics you wrote about because they generated comments?

Oh yeah! I mean the opposite, no. I did a post on the Civil War, and I got a really negative comment. I thought to myself, "Ok, I can never make fun of red-neck conservatives again, because red-neck conservatives are reading my blog." Never mind that one of my relatives' great grandfather fought for the South until the end. I'm more Confederate than that whack-o who found me. But I never wrote about the subject again.

Did sell ads on your blog, or try to sell ads?

I never took ads. I'll never market my children for human consumption.

Aisha Sultan, *Dirty Laundry*
3/18/13, via telephone

Why did you start your parenting blog?

I started 15 years ago as an old-fashioned print journalist, then I took a year off when I had my daughter. After about 9 months, I realized the kind of information I was looking for as a new parent wasn't in the paper. There wasn't a space for parents of young kids to get the information we were wanted. So I made a pitch to the Post (St. Louis Post-Dispatch) to create a space online for parent stories. The column was originally called *Dirty Laundry*.

Do you think of yourself as a Mommy Blogger?

First and foremost, I consider myself a journalist and a writer. That transcends the medium - print or online.

What are the primary topics you write about?

Sometimes I write about what is happening in my family. Sometimes I write about a trend I see, or an interesting study. Sometimes I write about what's happening in the community that affects a lot of families.

Why do readers choose to read blogs instead of other media?

At the Post, we learned that online blogs and sites were where a lot of parents were going for information and stories because newspapers were neglecting parent topics. Also, once the Post created an online place for parents, it became a community building space for families. It's really awkward for journalists to talk about their families in a public forum. We weren't good at it. We weren't used to it. Bloggers are much better at sharing personal stories. We learned a lot from them.

Is your audience local? Was it large from the outset?

I had Post readers from the start. But now readers come from all over the map. It has taken me years to build a following. Years.

What are the tactics that have helped you grow your audience the most?

Initially, posting daily or close to daily helped. Linking to current news stories helped. Posting stuff related to news on our site always got readers, especially if there was big breaking local news. Facebook helps. Following other bloggers, mostly to see what other people are writing about and what seems to be getting readers' attention.

Do you comment on other people's blogs, or participate in other ways?

I would email bloggers directly to participate in their conversations, rather than leave a comment. Early on, I interviewed bloggers who were getting massive audiences. I found some local bloggers, parent voices, to get their perspective on audience. You couldn't tell they were local.

Do you recall a time when you thought, “Now I have a following?” a *tipping point*?

Yes, when I realized the column (Dirty Laundry) was appearing in other parenting newspaper blogs. My columns would turn up in the random-est places. The fact that readers share links and that anyone anywhere can find you is great for writers because writers want readers.

Are blog readers different than print readers in the relationship they have with you, the blogger?

You interact with readers a lot more than traditional print journalists ever could. I respond to comments - to the thoughtful ones. I answer 100 emails a week. I get phone messages, even letters.

Do you routinely do marketing activities to continue to find readers?

I do a lot of outreach to build community. I speak at schools, at civic events, at newspaper clinics. People have to know you as a person. Once they do, if they are interested in you, they can find you and read you.

Do you use social media to market the blog?

Yes. I put my columns on Facebook to make them public. People share the stories on their walls. I have built up a following on Twitter of over 6,000 people. At first I tweeted about my column. But now the way to build a following is by putting out all kinds of information that interests you. I tweet about families, technology, food, sports, politics, the way we live now, political stories that are personally interesting to me, and other great information I come across. Now only about 5% of my tweets promote my own work. If Twitter is just a self-promotion tool for you, nobody will follow you.

What analytics about your blog do you watch?

I look at what is shared through Facebook, using a Facebook counter. And I look at Twitter byline searches.

Are there any topics you write about because you’ve found they generate comments?

There are topics the newspaper wants me to write about. I guess you’d call them “link bait.” These are topics that are provocative, timely, controversial. Or that deal with celebrities, or are a hot topic locally. People are always interested in what is happening in their neighborhood and in their schools. There are some stories we just all have to cover.

How do you encourage readers to return to the blog routinely?

Readers respond to autobiographical information. When a journalist writes about herself the reader thinks, “I know you. You are a friend of mine. I know your family.” As a writer, you have a totally different relationship with your readers than you do as a straight news journalist.