

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.