

Women are the power users of the Internet ... and forging a new women's movement online

In early 2005, BlogHer was first formed to answer a question roiling through the mainstream blogosphere: Where are the women bloggers? Actually the question “Where are the women?” was being asked about far more than the blogosphere ... the questions were many and comprehensive:

- ~ Where are the women bloggers?
- ~ Where are the women on conference speaking rosters?
- ~ Where are the women on the Op-Ed pages of America's newspapers?
- ~ Where are the women on the Sunday morning talking head shows?
- ~ Where are the women in graduate programs and tenured positions?
- ~ Where are the women in Fortune 500 boardrooms?

BlogHer decided that rather than simply express outrage at women's work being marginalized, we would try to see how many women bloggers we could gather at a conference by and about women bloggers.

The answer to the question "Where are the women bloggers?" was all too often based on the assumption that women weren't blogging about the topic being considered, whether technology, politics, business etc. So when Internet and technology conference speaking rosters were skewed 80-90% toward male speakers, and when media reports on the burgeoning blogosphere quoted and cited nearly 100% male bloggers, the rationale was that the rosters merely reflected the gender ratio out in the real world. The only problem with this rationale was that neither casual observation, nor, more objectively, the statistics reported by the Pew Internet & American Life Project supported it.

BlogHer decided that rather than simply express outrage at women's work being marginalized, we would try to see how many women bloggers we could gather at a conference by and about women bloggers. Men were invited and welcome, but the point was to feature the voices of women bloggers. We threw the basic idea out to the community in a series of blog posts and were thrilled by the immediate and passionate response!

The women's blogging community didn't respond with a passive "entertain me" attitude. On the contrary, they reacted with an active "What can I do?" spirit. In fact we coined the term "do-ocracy" to indicate that if a BlogHer attendee had an idea for something they wanted to see at the conference, we were committed to helping them do it themselves! Volunteerism contributed to every aspect of the conference. Volunteerism offers were extended towards the BlogHer organization, and also to one another. Attendees subsidized other attendees' conference passes. Attendees offered to pick people up from the airport. Attendees offered their spare bedrooms...to people they had thus far only met virtually. Attendees put sessions together themselves, and we provided what we called the "Room of Your Own" break-out rooms in which to present those sessions.

Yes, the question "Where are the women bloggers?" was answered emphatically when BlogHer 2005 launched with 300 attendees, 100 people on the waiting list, and literally hundreds of blog posts pre- and post-conference. The answer wasn't just that the women bloggers are out there. It was that the women bloggers are out there in huge numbers, blogging about everything under the sun, changing their worlds and changing the face of the online marketplace, but media, advertisers, recruiters, and others who wanted to know them didn't know where to look.

Women are taking advantage of the connected, collaborative qualities of web tools, such as blogs, customizing them to serve the ways they prefer to connect, shop, and express themselves.

Blogs, the personal publishing platform accessible to anyone with access to a computer and the Internet, are affording women the opportunity to change their personal lives, their families, their careers and businesses, their communities, and the world around them ... and these vehicles are making them more visible to the world. The blogosphere is growing rapidly, and women have caught up to and are exceeding men as the power users of the Internet in general, and the blogosphere specifically. Women are taking advantage of the connected, collaborative qualities of web tools, such as blogs, customizing them to serve the ways they prefer to connect, shop, and express themselves. This fact shouldn't be lost on anyone, from web product developers to consumer goods companies wondering how to reach their customers as usage statistics decline for other media channels. It is certainly not lost on BlogHer, and it is why our mission is to create opportunities for education, exposure and community for women bloggers.

Nobody puts women bloggers in a corner!

Why has this phenomenon, this new women's movement, been so stealthy in making itself known to the pundits of the web industry? It may be that despite the blogosphere's reputation as the Wild West of the Internet, it actually embraces compartmentalization and hierarchy in many ways. Women bloggers are resisting that very compartmentalization and hierarchy to forge their own blogosphere and drive the evolution of everyone's blogosphere.

Newspapers and their sites are still the one-stop-shop to find out what the “experts” are saying. But where is the one-stop-shop to find out what the people are saying?

Conventional blogging wisdom dictates that subject matter focus is the primary way to drive success (in the form of traffic and links) in the blogosphere. Bloggers and the sites that cater to them tend to put blogs and bloggers into clearly labeled boxes: political blogs, techie blogs, parenting blogs, fashion blogs, gossip blogs, business blogs. Not only that, but sites tend to cater to only a small number, even a single one, of those blogging segments. Both aggregating sites, such as Memorandum, and multi-author content sites, such as The Huffington Post, distribute different types of content to different sister sites or sub-sections of their site, rather than allow diverse content to live on one page. Because of this compartmentalization of blogs, it has been impossible to replicate, for example, the content of the (online or offline) Sunday *New York Times* without visiting multiple sites that cover Arts & Leisure and International News and Sports and Business and so on.

In a BlogHer demographic survey conducted in March and April of 2006, we found that while no topic-oriented magazine, e.g. *Newsweek*, *Parenting*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Glamour* or *In Style*, was read by more than 16% of BlogHer readers, somewhat surprisingly 68% of our readers still got their local daily newspaper. Newspapers and their sites are still the one-stop-shop to find out what the “experts” are saying. But where is the one-stop-shop to find out what the people are saying?

The BlogHer 2005 conference agenda aimed to appeal to all women bloggers, regardless of blogging focus, aimed to provide the proverbial “something for everyone.” It was a risk to bring such disparate groups of bloggers together. Would we simply have concurrent, but separate, tracks of bloggers having separate conference experiences?

The opposite occurred. Bloggers attended sessions outside their usual area of interest. Bloggers mingled with other bloggers that they never would have met in their existing online routine. Bloggers planted the seeds of ideas for blogging about new subjects and in new ways. Bloggers revealed that they actually had second and third blogs where they quietly indulged other passions in their lives. We discovered that women bloggers were ready to break out of their blogging boxes and celebrate that they were blogging multi-taskers, both in the blogs they read and the blogs they wrote.

The post-conference attendee survey proved this point when reviewing the subjects women said they were blogging about. Women who came to BlogHer blog about:

- ~ Life 62%
- ~ Entertainment & Arts 41%
- ~ Mommy and Family 41%
- ~ Feminism & Gender 34%
- ~ Technology & Web 31%
- ~ Politics & News 31%
- ~ Hobbies 30%
- ~ Food & Drink 26%
- ~ Media & Journalism 24%
- ~ Travel & Recreation 21%
- ~ Business & Careers 18%
- ~ Health & Wellness 18%
- ~ Sex & Relationships 18%
- ~ Fashion & Shopping 16%
- ~ Race & Ethnicity 12%

When people ask why the BlogHer Conference grew so much after only its first year, one of our answers is that we refused to silo women and their interests.

Clearly women are blogging about many topics on their blogs, ignoring conventional wisdom, and managing to build loyal, addicted audiences and host avid conversations on their blogs. This diversity of interests drove the creation, post BlogHer '05, of the BlogHer.org Web Community. We used the different topics that women had already told us in the survey that they were blogging about as our initial taxonomy. We encouraged members to self-categorize their blogs in the appropriate topic areas, and we hired contributing editors to work beats aligned with those topic areas... they regularly surf the blogs in their beat and point out the best of the blogging going on in it. Those contributing editor posts, whether about food, feminism or personal finance, all cycle through our home page...creating a dynamic and comprehensive view of the hot topics being blogged about every day.

A look at the most widely-read posts on BlogHer.org over the last month demonstrates that BlogHer readers appreciate diversity of content: the most popular posts have come in nearly a dozen different categories, including Entertainment, Politics & News, Health & Wellness, Eco-conscious & Green Living, Personal Finance, Technology & Web, Mommy & Family and Feminism & Gender.

BlogHer members can and regularly do jump from commenting on a political post to a parenting post to a post about reality TV. Women have been bringing their whole lives into the blogosphere, but the blogosphere was trying to break those lives into pieces, easily digestible chunks. BlogHer, the Conference and the Web Community, tries to let them pursue all of their interests in one place. When people ask why the BlogHer Conference grew so much after only its first year, one of our answers is that we refused to silo women and their interests.

If the future of the Web... 2.0 and beyond... is about the user, then a key lesson is to let the user design their own experience, and then let them take the wheel and drive that experience forward.

Women's blogs are changing the world around them... and the world is taking notice

Conventional blogging wisdom uses traditional measures for assessing impact in the blogosphere: stratospheric traffic, numerous links from other blogs, lucrative ad revenues, taking a prominent political or media figure down a peg, and even, on an altruistic day, delivering tangible relief to natural disaster victims.

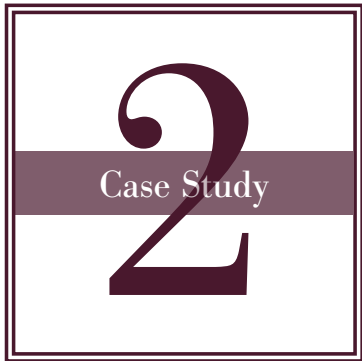
These measures of success are not invalid; they are only a very small part of the story.

BlogHer '06 certainly didn't need to ask the question "Where are the women bloggers?" anymore. So what did we want to explore? We decided we wanted to give women the opportunity to share their stories about how their blogs have changed their world, and that we wanted to honor those stories whether the impact was highly personal, purely political, strictly professional or truly global in nature. What we found, and it should have been no surprise, was that rarely did a blogger's story fit neatly into one compartment like those just listed. These are some of the stories that were told at BlogHer '06:



Stay-at-home mom turned entrepreneurial writer

Jenn Satterwhite had a personal blog (<http://www.mommyneedscoffee.com/>) where she let it all hang out... about parenting, marriage, even her status as a recovering addict. She built up an avid audience who engaged in lengthy substantive conversations about every post she published, a metric that no measurement tool picked up. These conversations not only helped Jenn feel not alone with her various struggles, they helped some of her readers feel not alone too. Her blog had already caught the attention of a literary agent, and Jenn has been working on a book. At BlogHer '05, Jenn was teamed up with two other bloggers, Jenny Lauck (<http://threekidcircus.com>) and Meghan Townsend (<http://mydogharriet.blogspot.com/>), to lead a conversation about MommyBlogging. Their serendipitous meeting at BlogHer led them to form a group blog (and business) together (<http://mommybloggers.com>) and led Jenn to seek out more professional writing opportunities. She is still blogging, but in more places for more sites, and between advertising revenue and writing retainers, Jenn has discovered a self-confidence in her talent and is contributing to her family's income. Jenn is only one example of a woman being compensated for what they love to do: telling real stories that bring women together. Whether that blogging income “pays for a month’s groceries”, represents “the first paycheck brought home in 15 years” (both real quotes from [BlogHerAds](#) participants) or supports an entire family, blogs are changing the world and increasingly the family budget for many women.



Kitchen table activism

Grace Davis (<http://gracedavis.typepad.com/katrinablog/>), Cooper Munroe & Emily McKhann (<http://www.beenthereclearinghouse.com/>) and Dina Mehta (<http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com/>) live on opposite sides of the world, but they each delivered tangible assistance to natural disaster victims at a time when FEMA and the Red Cross weren't. Armed with their cell phones and their blogs each of these women created a resource where people could find out about specific people with specific needs and have tangible assistance sent directly to them. The barriers to entry for this kind of effort were practically non-existent. Armed with free or nearly-free blog software and their email address books, these women started their blogs and spread the word. The response was phenomenal. These women can truly claim to have changed not only their world, but the world.



Changing the way we age

Millie Garfield (<http://mymomsblog.blogspot.com/>) may not be the world's oldest blogger, but at age 81 she's likely close to it. Millie has discovered an entirely new world full of friends from all over the world and ideas from all over the map. We've probably all seen older relatives whose worlds seem to grow smaller as they age. Their friends die or move away; their family may shrink; their physical health may prevent them from getting out and about like they did. Physical and emotional isolation are detrimental to anyone's health, let alone those whose condition may already be vulnerable. Blogging represents a way to expand our world and to stay connected to it. It also provides an opportunity to continue to exercise the brain... reading, writing, debating, formulating ideas, imagining how various experiences can contribute to tomorrow's blog post! Blogging and active participation in the blog community has the potential to change the way we age, providing unprecedented mental stimulation and emotional fulfillment. Millie doesn't have the time to wonder whether blogging "keeps her young" ... it keeps her too busy.



Establishing professional credibility and building a business

Mary Hodder (<http://napsterization.org/stories/>) was well known in the tech blogosphere, but having recently emerged from graduate school, her blog fame didn't necessarily equal automatic credibility as an entrepreneur looking to hire people and raise angel funding. Having her blog, though, created a forum for her to discuss her vision and her experience. The blog created a resource more comprehensive than a resume, with more depth than any portfolio, and it also provided a mechanism for her to have conversations and solicit feedback to help her develop her vision. Would Mary have gotten funding and built her business without a blog? No doubt. The blog delivered the head start she needed, and since she considers herself a late-blooming entrepreneur, that head start changed everything.



Finding support and staying sane

Perhaps one of the most unsung, world-changing qualities of participating in the blogosphere is the ability to find like-minded people, going through similar struggles ... alleviating the painful perception of isolation and eliminating the fear of social stigmas. There have always been ways to be part of a group ... support groups, networking groups, church groups, mother's groups, political parties, and more. The Internet affords people the ability to be anonymous and choose if and when to reveal themselves, safely seeking the answers to questions from the comfort and safety of home. When women responded to the question "how has your blog changed your world?" some of the responses spoke of the relief that came from finding other women who struggled with post-partum depression, or with crushing debt and the shame of having amassed it, or with the outcast feeling that came from abandoning one faith and adopting another, or with ambivalence over their career vs. family decisions ... whichever way those decisions went. The blogosphere can indeed be a great equalizer, and that can change the world for those who formerly felt alone.

Women have always been power consumers and connectors, and blogging has only amplified the influence that they have on one another.

Question: How do you approach a customer with a personal publishing platform? Answer: Carefully!

So, women blogging, changing their lives, changing their world. It's inspiring on an individual level, but why are companies, publishers, even political candidates taking notice? Why should anyone care outside the bloggers on each other's blog rolls? Women have always been power consumers and connectors, and blogging has only amplified the influence that they have on one another.

In the BlogHer reader demographic survey mentioned above we discovered that among women publishing platforms:

- ~ 66% of the readers of our affiliate bloggers visit daily
- ~ 93% are "certain to return" bloggers are part of a community of intensely loyal readers with their own personal
- ~ 48% blog themselves

(Source: BlogHer Ad Network demographic survey. More results are at: <http://blogher.org/node/5224>)

Some salient statistics from other publicly released reports also paint a vivid picture:

- ~ Women already outnumber men online in the U.S.— among marrieds, people with kids at home and in every age category but 65+
- ~ Women are equally as likely as men to “read a blog,” and “create a blog”
- ~ Blog readers are 11 percent more likely than the average Internet user to have incomes of or greater than \$75,000.
- ~ Women continue to control 83% of household spending
- ~ 51 percent of blog readers shop online.
- ~ 87% of blog readers research products online before buying them in person or in a store.

(Sources: ClickZ Stats (August, 2005); BIGresearch CIA (June 2006); Pew Internet and American Life Project (most recently July 2006); Diversity Best Practices, 2004, WOW! Quick Facts Women and Diversity.)

As revealed in our post-conference survey, women blog about their lives, including the products they buy, the tools they use, the books they read and much more. Blogs provide the forum to share the good ... and the not-so-good. A report from last year's Search Engine Strategies conference in New York indicated that the top search results about products and companies were beginning to be dominated by consumer-generated postings on blogs, message boards and forums. As women increasingly dominate these online channels, they represent a force to be reckoned with by anyone who cares about customer care and positive word of mouth and brand awareness ... and isn't that everyone?

Women have the potential to change the marketplace, change governments, change the world. We believe that informed and passionate women who band together can make their voices heard and realize that potential.

Why is BlogHer's Mission to create opportunities for women bloggers?

Women make up more than half the population, more than half of the Internet users, more than half of the bloggers. Women control more than 80% of the household dollar. Women start more than half of all new small businesses in America. And are more than half of registered voters in America. Women have adopted blogging technology at an unprecedented rate. Yet, women's representation in the halls of power, brick and mortar halls and virtual halls, is nowhere near their level of participation and their level of economic influence and impact.

Women have the potential to change the marketplace, change governments, change the world. We believe that informed and passionate women who band together can make their voices heard and realize that potential. The Internet and, more specifically, the blogosphere, provide the means for wider distribution of women's ideas ... across what may have once been the barriers of geography, class, income, nationality, language ...

That's why BlogHer's mission is to create opportunities for education, exposure and community for women bloggers. So that they can continue to change their own worlds, and change the world around them.

ABOUT BLOGHER

In February 2005 Elisa Camahort, Jory Des Jardins and Lisa Stone, three bloggers and solopreneurs, joined forces to found BlogHer. BlogHer's mission is to create opportunities for women bloggers to pursue exposure, education, community and economic empowerment. Via BlogHer, Camahort, Des Jardins and Stone have launched a web community, conferences and most recently an advertising network open to quality bloggers of all sizes (www.BlogHerAds.com). The BlogHer web community (www.blogher.org) is the Web's number one guide to blogs by women, where 50+ editors write guides to the hottest blogging by women in 25+ popular topics. BlogHer Conferences have sold out two years in a row and attracted premium sponsors, such as General Motors, Windows Live Spaces, Johnson's and Yahoo!. The next BlogHer event will be the BlogHer Business Conference in New York City this March.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisa Camahort is a co-founder of BlogHer LLC (<http://blogher.org>) and is President of Events and Marketing. A marketing executive with 16 years of experience in Silicon Valley, Elisa opened her own high-tech marketing consultancy, Worker Bees, after a successful career as a marketing executive in the cable broadband sector. Her most recent corporate position was Senior Director of Product Marketing at Terayon Communication Systems. She has been published numerous times and has extensive public speaking experience, most recently presenting on social media and building online communities to various technology and marketing organizations. Elisa was at the vanguard of professional and business blogging, and currently contributes to eight blogs. Elisa is an advisory board member of the Society for New Communications Research.

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Zoom out	[ctl] [-]	[#] [-]
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