

BLOGGING FOR DOLLARS: EVOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the changes within the blogosphere from its inception and into the future, focusing primarily on the implications of these changes for pro-bloggers within the space. The thesis researches the viability of the sphere for entrepreneurs going forward and, if viable, by what management strategies. Interviews with a broad range of bloggers were conducted in order to determine recent and expected changes for the space, strategies for managing those changes, and an overall analysis of viability. The research resulted in 5 major recent changes within the blogosphere regarding definition, the level of professionalism, the effect of mobile technology, revenue drivers, and social media. In addition, the blogosphere is expected to continue well into the future, albeit with different formats. Overall, despite its evolution, the space is also still considered viable if the pro-blogger is willing to put in the amount of effort required to make it so. Implications for those already within the space and those seeking to enter it are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century's inception of the web brought along with it entirely new forms of communication and data collection that have now revolutionized the world over. Emails, social media, newsfeeds, blogs, and more all vie for our constant attention and shape the very world we live in. The Internet explosion has created an entirely new "virtual" world in which people form relationships, do business, and express opinions. In fact, the web's influence has become so disruptive and pervasive in society that we are now living in what is deemed the Digital Age. But the space is evolving at breakneck speed, and many within the realm are struggling to keep up.

This fact is particularly evident within the *blogosphere*, or the vast collection of all blogs that make up the Internet's communities and social networks (Lahm, 2011). The space has undergone a number of rapid changes since its beginning in the late twentieth century, and the impact of blogging has varied accordingly. With the creation of easy-to-use blogging software in the early 2000s, even those who did not know how to code or design websites could publish content online at a very low cost, which opened the space to a wide variety of users (Boyer, 2011; Lahm, 2011). Since then, both individuals and businesses have utilized the blogosphere for a number of purposes, including but not limited to marketing, news and company updates, customer and employee engagement, and even as a means of primary or supplemental income. However, it should be noted that blogging initially rose up out of the needs of the community—for self-expression; for reliable and quick information; for a place of open discussion; for the sharing of expertise; and other such community needs and desires (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002).

As such, numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to make sense of the evolving space. Allen (2014) profiled the top 100 blogs by value to analyze the overarching

characteristics, revenue models, and social media strategies of successful blogs. He found that the majority of top blogs are run by groups of bloggers who primarily use a revenue model based on selling advertising space on the site; these blogs also commonly use social media as a means of sharing posts with viewers (Allen, 2014). In addition, blogs are used as a tool for marketing management, collection of feedback, and information updates (Singh, 2008). However, blogging can also become a stumbling block for marketers. The opinions of influential bloggers are often difficult to tailor or suppress (Maurya, 2011). The medium that was once seen as a credible opinion source has now become so inundated with marketing efforts that it oftentimes is no longer seen as a genuine form of word-of-mouth advertising (Maurya, 2011). At the same time, the blogosphere has become a space of opportunity for entrepreneurs to launch successful businesses. The evolution of the blogosphere to include more than simple text and photo blogs has expanded the sphere's potential to engage viewers and thus attract more customers (Lahm, 2011). Because of the numerous uses that blogging allows for, it's no wonder that the space has been of particular interest to scholars and businesspersons alike. However, there is still a gap in the research regarding blogging as an entrepreneurial pursuit within itself, how the continuing transformation of the space impacts those entrepreneurs today, and the ongoing viability of the space for pro-bloggers in reference to that transformation. This paper will begin to bridge this gap in the research and provide insightful, relevant suggestions for current and potential pro-bloggers.

The research will focus primarily upon the question “*How has the evolution of blogging affected the business of blogging, and what does the future look like for those within the sphere?*” The paper will largely be exploratory in nature, but with a general expectation that bloggers will have to utilize multiple formats and social media networks in order to be

successful. To explore these ideas, the paper will present a review of the history and previous literature surrounding the topic. The next part of the paper will present and discuss the information gathered through interviews of various pro-bloggers within the sphere. Then, using this information, predictions about the future of the blogosphere and the subsequent impact on entrepreneurs within the space will be discussed. Finally, the paper will conclude with a set of strategies for pro-bloggers on how to manage the ever-changing space while still remaining profitable and a general conclusion about the future viability of the space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINING BLOGS

In order to understand the relevance of blogging in today's world, we must first define what a blog and blogging actually is. With the evolution of the blogosphere, new forms and techniques of blogging have emerged that have made a precise definition of the practice more complex.

The introduction of the term "blog" originally came from the word "linklog," in which collections of user-composed hyperlinks were gathered, updated, and shared with others (Dumova, 2012). When commentary began to be added to the collections, the term "linkblog" was born. When these linkblogs were combined with personal, diary-like Web pages, the term "weblog" was coined. Eventually the term was shortened to simply "blog," which generally referenced the joining of hyperlinks and self-expression into a single entity (Dumova, 2012).

As more features were being added to blogs, more definitions sprang up. Early blogs had three primary features: 1) links, 2) commentary, and 3) chronological order. Eventually, Really Simple Syndication (or RSS)—a feature that allowed readers to subscribe to a blog and receive updates of new postings, as well as the integration of "pingbacks" that notified the blogger when

another had linked to his or her posts—was added (Garden, 2011). The truly drastic change, however, was the development of blogging software, such as WordPress, in 2002 that allowed readers to leave comments. Blogging shifted from a primarily online personal journal to a more interactive dialogue between bloggers and readers and served as a space for discussion and debate on any number of topics (Garden, 2011). While the core features of blogging remained, the space evolved from a one-way dialogue to a multi-person channel.

Since then, blogs have exploded onto the Internet scene and cover a variety of subjects and audiences. Consequently, some have suggested that in order to successfully discuss the term, one must specify what context is being considered. Is the blog personal or professional? Does a group or an individual control the blog (Garden, 2011)? Who owns the blog, what field is it in, what types of multimedia does it use (text, photo, video, and/or audio), and what is its platform (Dumova, 2012)? Many use the term blogging to refer to both the medium and genre of blogs (Garden, 2011), while others see it as a distinct industry (Dumova, 2012).

Blogging has also been defined in an affordance-based context that defines blogs by the features they present. The three core features discussed above are still typically held as the primary determinants of what constitutes blogs and blogging, but the importance of each in regards to the practice is still argued. For example, hyperlinking to other blogs—the defining characteristic of blogging’s predecessors—is now only present on 52% of blogs (Garden, 2011; Herring et al., 2007). Additionally, commentary on most blogs is not utilized to the extent to where it could be considered a defining feature of the blog (Garden, 2011; Herring et al., 2004), and the reverse chronological order feature often includes sites that are not traditionally considered blogs, such as company update newsletters and news sites (Garden, 2011; Rettberg, 2008).

To try to distinguish blogs past these original features, it is generally agreed upon that blogs are created and managed on blogging software sites like Word Press; posts make up the foundation of a blog; and each post typically contains a title, timestamp, permalink, and the names of the contributing authors (Garden, 2011; Hourihan, 2002; Juettemeyer, 2008). In addition, blogs can be distinguished from other public-space sites in that the blogs are primarily controlled and managed by those authors who write the posts (Garden, 2011). Others posit that a defining feature of blogs is that they are primarily “user-centered, user-driven, and user-distributed” (Dumova, 2012, p. 250). These additional characteristics of blogs may help readers and analysts distinguish between a blog and other forms of websites.

NEW FORMS MERIT NEW DEFINITIONS OF BLOGGING

Blogging is also closely related to social media. Known as “Community” in the early 2000s (Cassidy, 2006) and largely despised by American corporate brands at this time, social media has now become mainstream in society. Social media can be defined as “websites and other online means of communication that are used by large groups of people to share information and to develop social and professional contacts” (social-media, n.d.). Thus, blogging can be seen as a specific *type* of social media. However, blogging can also be viewed as the very foundation of social media. While there are various definitions of the term, blogging emphasizes the development and sharing of user-created content (Dumova, 2012), which can also be argued to be the basis of social media.

As both social media and blogging have transformed, a new form of blogging has arisen, called *micro-blogging*, which includes sites such as Twitter and Tumblr that provide shorter, simpler means of content-creation and increased interactivity between bloggers and readers. Other various types of blogging have also cropped up, including *social blogging*, *vlogging* (video

blogging), and *live blogging* (real-time updates during events). As the space continues to develop, there may be no boundaries to the different forms that blogging can adapt to (Dumova, 2012). However, with the onset of social media and other technology advances (such as the increasing importance of mobile apps), the entrance of controlled space has become an issue. On a website, bloggers completely control their content and business. On social media and mobile, a blogger is required to depend upon the platform, which may change in unexpected ways and negatively influence the business. This development has some implications for the continued transformation of blogging and will be discussed further in the following pages. For now, it is recognized that the very definition of what constitutes a blog will continue to develop.

HISTORY OF BLOGGING

PIONEERING BLOGGING: 1994-2001

The precise moment of blogging's inception is unclear, primarily because blogging did not occur as a systematic, pre-planned effort to bring something new into the media. Rather, blogs sprang up spontaneously as the web began to take on a fuller form in the lives of everyday people. Beginning as a list of links to interesting web content, they grew into online diaries, opinion and editorial pages, and much more as time progressed (Bausch et al., 2002).

One of the earliest recognized blogging pioneers is Justin Hall, who at 11 years of age began a website called "Links from the Underground" (www.links.net/) (Bausch et al., 2002). His thousands of postings since 1994 have included photos, links, and personal stories ranging from his father's suicide to romantic relationships to his travels abroad (Harmanci, 2005). His site is still functional and running even today.

Around this same time, many other people began similar endeavors. As early as 1993, corporate companies offered What's New pages to update readers to website changes, company

updates, and recent press releases. In 1996, Michael Sippey ran a site called “The Filter” on which he shared links and published articles about current technology news. In 1997, people began to post shorter bits of writing more frequently. Dive Winer, CEO of UserLand Software, and Jorn Barger, owner of the site *Robot Wisdom*, were two such people. Barger later on that year began writing more diary-like entries to augment the link postings, and he later termed his site a *weblog*. In 1998, roughly 30 other weblogs sprung up that provided visitors with frequently updated posts of interesting links (Bausch et al., 2002). Open Diary launched in the same year, before the term “blog” was coined (Boyer, 2011).

By 1999, articles were being published about the weblog phenomenon. Then, in that same year, blogging software was developed that enabled users to manage content without any programming skills. This development opened up the blogging world to those outside of the technologically proficient realms and heavily contributed to blogging’s later explosion. Pitas (www.pitas.com) was the first tool primarily concerned with weblog creation and management. The site allowed people to create a free account, customize their weblog template, and create simple posts consisting of a title, URL, and description of each post. The site also automated link-creation and archiving, a key feature of weblogs (Bausch et al., 2002). The site eventually transformed into DiaryLand.com, which is still running today.

One month later, Pyra Labs released Blogger (www.blogger.com/), which differed from Pitas in that it required users to have their own site hosted on a separate server. This meant that the “programming, maintaining, and archiving of weblog information was taken care of by the service on a central server accessible from anywhere, leaving users to host the output on their own sites” (Bausch et al., 2002, A Brief History of Weblogs section, para. 8). Blogger also

allowed users to maintain multiple weblogs on a single account and offered additional customization tools, such as tags and differing archive templates (Baush et al., 2002).

Other tools developed as well, such as UserLand Software's Manila, which was essentially a content management system that incorporated weblogs and a system for discussions. In 1999, LiveJournal launched into the weblog space (though it had actually been created before Pitas and Blogger, but was not used for weblogging until later) (Bausch et al., 2002). The tool RDF Site Summary, later renamed Rich Site Summary—or RSS—was also released for My.Netscape.com (Boyer, 2011).

In 2000, the first interactive conference for weblog authors was held in Austin, Texas, which signifies the rapid growth of the importance of blogging during this time (Bausch et al., 2002). By 2001, Movable Type was launched as a self-hosted blog publishing platform, and the online message board Drupal, an open source project, was released (Boyer, 2011). Greymatter was also developed, which was a weblog management system that contained many features that other platforms lacked at this time. By this point, the explosion of new tools and management platforms had fueled an explosive growth in the realm of blogging, and stories covered in weblogs began to supplement or compete with traditional media news coverage (Bausch et al., 2002).

In fact, the events of September 11, 2001, created an explosion in demand for blog articles that detailed the events surrounding the terrorist attacks. The vast uptake in demand for blog posts surrounding 9/11 was so large that it actually forced Blogger to revive its search engine to allow hungry readers to find the information they were looking for. Readers were flocking to blogs, as the authors typically posted stories and information before traditional media and wrote about the topic well after. Weblogs provided a service of connecting people to each

other and to valuable information quickly during a desperate time. An entire subgenre of blogs—called *warblogs*—can be attributed to this period, and the event is what brought legitimacy to blogging and bloggers with or without a former traditional media career. Warblogger Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit had no prior experience in traditional media, while bloggers Andrew Sullivan and Jeff Jarvis had. All three bloggers became wildly popular during this time as they exposed material not broadcast by traditional news sources (Bausch et al., 2002).

THE BLOGGING EXPLOSION: 2002-2004

By 2002, the growth of the blogosphere was becoming quite robust with over 500,000 estimated blogs across the Internet. By 2004, the estimation jumped to over 5 million blogs (Gill, 2004). During this timespan, many blogs had moved into the political realm and continued the challenge to traditional media journalists of providing real, unfiltered coverage. In February of 2002, Google bought Blogger, effectively tying the technological opportunity of blogging to the political realm by allowing the “democratization of political discourse” (Gill, 2004, p. 2). The sphere began to have massive influence over the media as bloggers began to challenge the stories offered by mainstream media.

A capstone moment for blogging’s triumph over traditional media in reporting politics occurred in 2002 when Sen. Trent Lott made racist comments at the 100th birthday bash for Sen. Strom Thurmond. The comments, initially glossed over by mainstream media, were picked up by bloggers “Atrios” and Joshua Marshall, and then again by Glenn Reynolds and Andrew Sullivan. Readers and bloggers alike, appalled at both the comments and lack of media coverage, fueled the story until mainstream media began reporting the incident, which eventually led to a rebuke from President Bush and Lott’s subsequent resignation as Majority Leader (Gill, 2004; Sjober, 2004). By this point, bloggers became media and business fact checkers and grassroots reporters

(Gill, 2004). Technorati also launched during this time and became the primary blog search engine that helped readers find the content they were searching for (Boyer, 2011). Other blogs not within the political realm, such as Gizmodo—a technology blog—and Gawker—a celebrity gossip blog—also gained traction. RSS spread beyond My.Netscape.com and began to be incorporated into online newspapers like the *Christian Science Monitor* (Gill, n.d.).

By 2003, Google launched AdSense (Boyer, 2011). The technology connected advertisements with blogs based on content and paid the site owner each time a visitor clicked on an ad (now referred to as *cost-per-click advertising*). For the first time, bloggers could make money from advertisers without a large sales force (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006). AOL also implemented a blogging platform called AOL Journals and acquired Weblogs, Inc. (Gill, n.d.; Schofield, 2003); popular blog publisher the Huffington Post launched; and WordPress—the widely used blogging platform—also started. The popular social media site Myspace also launched a blogging function integrated into users’ profiles (Boyer, 2011). In addition, the political realm continued to be a hot genre for blogging. Ads began to appear in mass quantities on political blogs (Gill, n.d.), and the war in Iraq expanded blogs into the realm of international politics (Gill, 2004). Iraqi blogger Salam Pax gained a global audience during this time.

In 2004, the blogosphere continued to develop as Blogger and WordPress added additional features like Picasa and Plugins (Boyer, 2004). By the end of the year, the word “blog” was declared to be the Merriam-Webster “Word of the Year” (Gill, n.d.).

BLOGGING MOVES MAINSTREAM: 2005-PRESENT

The widespread influence of blogging during 2002-2004 helped blogging gain a foothold in mainstream media. By 2005, it was estimated that 32 million U.S. citizens read blogs and about \$100 million was spent on blog ads in that year alone (Gill, n.d.). TMZ—which as of 2011

received 18.5 million hits per month—was launched by AOL and Warner Brothers, and other mega-blogs cropped up, such as Mashable and TechCrunch. In the process, blogging began to transform again as sites such as YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006 created new forms of blogging, respectively deemed *vlogging* and *microblogging* (Boyer, 2011).

A new development also began to take shape during this time: entrepreneurial blogging, or using a blogging platform to make money. While pro-blogging really began in 2002 with introduction of AdSense, the practice was still considered to be in its infancy by 2006. The money initially created by AdSense was by and large just supplemental income, and it wasn't until the later 2000s that a few individuals could really be seen making a living off of the practice (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006). Individuals such as Michael Arrington of TechCrunch, Nick Denton of Gawker and Gizmodo, Jason Calacanis of Weblogs Inc., John Battelle and Pierre Omidyar of Federated Media Publishing, Heather Armstrong of Dooce, and Mark Frauenfelder of Boing Boing are all examples of pioneering pro-bloggers that made substantial income from blogging by 2006 (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006). These entrepreneurs set into motion a “gold rush-style stampede into the blogosphere” (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006, p. 6) as countless would-be professional bloggers attempted to replicate the success of these popular entrepreneurs. However, despite the extremely low costs of blogging, turning a blog into a profitable business is no easy task, as the blogger must continually publish new articles to keep up traffic and revenue. Even a wildly popular blog may have a hard time sustaining such demands and subsequent success (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006). As a current example of this, Andrew Sullivan, one of the main people to bring blogging mainstream, just quit blogging despite wild success, saying, “The truth is, I had to stop primarily because it was killing me” (Kludt, 2015). Despite employing a small staff, creating

over 40 posts per day every day for years can obviously create burnout if not managed correctly (Kludt, 2015). This is a primary concern in creating a long-term business through blogging.

By 2007, however, another platform became available to bloggers: Tumblr, a microblogging and sharing platform (Boyer, 2011). And, by the end of the year, only 5% of U.S. newspapers did not utilize reporter blogs; by 2009 it was estimated that 77% of people who used the Internet read blogs. Blogs now spanned over 81 different languages with 900,000 new posts created daily. By 2010, 35% of bloggers made some sort of income off of their blogs (Boyer, 2011).

Technology, however, has continued to evolve and has created new avenues and forms of blogging even in to 2015. The use of mobile devices and tablets for blogging has increased, and social media sites like Google+ and Twitter have adapted to and been widely adopted by bloggers (Boyer, 2011). Other blog platforms—such as Medium (www.medium.com)—have opted to emphasize the long-text form of blogging, while still others emphasize an adaptable blog publication format (see ghost.org) that is customizable for a company or personal brand. As is evident by the history recounted above, the blogosphere is a volatile place, and the continued evolution of the space has implications for the influence and viability of bloggers and blogging.

BLOGS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

After reviewing the general concept of blogging and blogging history, it is now necessary to review the context in which blogs will be studied in this research: as a form of online entrepreneurship. Despite the inception of pro-blogging—or blogging as a form of income-generation—in the early 2000s (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006), there has been surprisingly little scholarly research on the topic. However, Lahm (2011) does provide interested readers with a good overview of the state of sphere. Since 2005, the number of blogs, bloggers, and readers has

increased substantially. Much of this is due to the fact that startup is inexpensive but the potential influence is large. Easy-to-use blogging software, low bandwidth and web-hosting requirements and fees, and new technologies all enable the continued growth of pro-blogging (Lahm, 2011; Madden, 2005). Blogging software like WordPress is widely adopted and has a number of built-in functions that make content management simple (Lahm, 2011). In addition, companies and entrepreneurs alike have seen the benefit of using blogs as a way to market to specific audiences (Lahm, 2011; Battenberg, 2008). Blogging allows for “conversational marketing” that is seen as more trustworthy and believable to prospective consumers (Lahm, 2011, p. 30; Karpinski, 2008). It is also compatible with search engine optimization (Lahm, 2006; Why Blog?, 2011) and is being integrated into news consumption (Lahm, 2006). In essence, the entrepreneurial blogosphere is space for entrepreneurs and small businesses to actively participate with prospective and current customers. It is a widely recognized method for marketing that entrepreneurs cannot ignore, and it is an opportunity to develop authentic, dynamic relationships with stakeholders (Lahm, 2006).

Despite the continued growth of the blogosphere, however, some argue that this “world of abundance” is actually a disadvantage to bloggers and that blogging is actually dying (Ferguson, 2010). A new blog is made every second, doubling the size of the blogosphere about every 5 ½ months (Ferguson, 2010; Sifry, 2006). This fact means that it is difficult for a blog to be discovered, and out of the millions of blogs on the World Wide Web, 50 thousand to 100 thousand grab the majority of viewers (Ferguson, 2010; Quenqua 2009). In order to be successful, then, a pro-blogger may find it best to compete in the “magic middle” in which a blog is specifically targeted toward a small niche and can thus attract larger swarms of advertisers aligned with this niche (Ferguson, 2010; Sifry, 2006).

To garner larger traffic and thus a greater number of advertisers, Singh & Singh (2008) have identified some best practices for blogs that enhance marketing efforts. A successful entrepreneurial blog will 1) frequently update content; 2) link to similar blogs; 3) publish short summary posts with links to extra outside content; 4) encourage debate in the comments; and 5) define the blog by a unique style. Many companies also utilize multiple social platforms to reach viewers; however, most focus on one specific platform as their primary means of engaging readers (Shaffer & Garnett, 2011). The most popular social media platforms among the top 100 blogs by value are Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, dig, del.icio.us, Tumblr, Yahoo, Google, MySpace, Technorati, and MSM (Allen, 2014).

The top blogs also utilize similar revenue models. Of the four considered possibilities (donations, selling, advertising, and network support), advertising was utilized by 80% of those blogs to raise revenue, with roughly 50% using only 4 or less embedded advertisements, but 29% heavily leveraging 10 or more advertisements on the site. The other forms serve as a means of gaining supplemental income, with donations being the least frequently used means. In addition, roughly half of the top blogs are affiliated with a larger blogging network (Allen, 2014). Other tactics for profitability include hosting content elsewhere to keep costs down and working with marketers to recommend brand products to generate additional revenue (Sloan & Kaihla, 2006).

However, the entrepreneurial world of blogging is an ever-changing and volatile environment that requires constant upkeep to be successful. Best practices, marketing methods, revenue models, and other such means of running a profitable blog must be constantly assessed to ensure that the life of the entrepreneurial blog is not cut short.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

There are a number of theories revolving around the topic of social media and blogging, but there are three in particular that are especially insightful for this paper: social-network theory, media convergence, and digital convergence. Together, the theories inform how blogging “stars” are created and what methods these bloggers may utilize to expand their influence.

Social-network theory has two components: structure and flow (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Granovetter, 1973). *Structure* defines the potential for influence of a social-networker. The greater the number of connections that a user has and the more central that the networker is to those connections, the more likely that the social-networker is to be an “influencer” within his or her own network (Kietzmann et al., 2011). *Flow*, however, refers to the strength of a networker’s connections. It considers the types of resources involved and how those resources are utilized in the relationship. Enduring, affective relationships are stronger, while weak relationships are occasional and distant (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Krackhardt, 1992; Hansen, 1999). Flow also considers the “multiplexity” of relationships” (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p. 246), which is defined by the number of relationships that connect a networker to another person. Structure and flow inform what level of trust is needed between users on the platform and the subsequent level of formality and regulation requirements of the site (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The theory can also be applied to how bloggers utilize their own sites and other various social media websites to grow their blogs.

The second theory, media convergence, can help detail the role of blogging in communication and help forecast the future of the sphere. It theorizes that various media types will be combined to “enable technological innovations, produce better content that can be disseminated more effectively, and to facilitate two-way communication between content producers and consumers” (Dumova, 2012, p. 253). Media convergence is a process that

ultimately “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 34). The theory posits that, rather than a collective, integrative system of changes, convergence will take the form of piecemeal transitions involving the cultural, legal, economic, and technological shifts that will eventually determine power balances in the new media landscape. As media technologies develop, the means of producing and distributing content will become more cost effective and efficient. However, mainstream commercial media will also become increasingly concentrated (Jenkins, 2004).

These changes will create two forms of power within the space. Power can be gained through 1) media concentration or 2) collective intelligence. The latter has emerged as web communities have formed in which voluntary community members mutually produce, share, and process information. The size—and thus power—of the content’s audience is determined by its relevance to the diverse online community (Jenkins, 2004; Levy, 1997). This latter form of power is essentially encompassed in blogging as bloggers emerge and create “a new vision of media politics” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 37) that diverge from the traditional power held by media companies.

Media convergence is also a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up process. Media companies are learning to use the digital space to speed up distribution of media across various channels to “expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 37). Consumers, on the other hand, are learning how to increasingly control the space in terms of content and flow and to communicate more effectively with mass media companies. The two parties sometimes work in harmony with each other while at other times war against one another (Jenkins, 2004).

The phenomenon, however, creates opportunities for both media companies and consumers as media convergence forces the evolution of the media business model. As the traditional media model disintegrates, the media industry may find opportunities within the trends of “globalization, horizontal integration, consolidation of media ownership, vertical disintegration and the creation of new media channels” (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008, p. 242). The industry may find new markets, new ways to allocate resources, and new channels that could prove more profitable or efficient than the traditional model. However, the industry will also have to overcome many challenges, such as the new cultural and political issues that arise as the world becomes more globalized and the management of a media ownership structure that allows for only a few major players dotted by niche operators within the same space (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008).

Consumers also find new opportunities within the trends of “democratization of content, user-generated content, personalization of schedules, social networking, and divergence of consumer groups” (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008, p. 245). Users can now share content and information with peers completely free of charge and advertising; produce and share their own media; filter media; and much more as convergence continues to occur (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). Advertisers may even find opportunities as the digital landscape evolves to find ways to deliver marketing in more targeted, impactful ways (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). Clearly, the theory of media convergence could have significant, positive implications for all parties involved if the transition is managed well. However, producers and consumers will have to come to an agreement on how changes should occur within the areas of audience measurement; media content regulation; structure of the digital economy; restriction of media ownership; media

aesthetics; intellectual property rights; party relations; globalization; and citizen engagement in order to do so (Jenkins, 2004).

The third theory, digital convergence, informs media convergence and portends that both traditional and new media will combine into a digital, computerized format (Dumova, 2012; Pavlik, 1996; Pavlik, 2008). With both types of convergence, media can be considered *participatory* with increased social interaction between reader and writer (Dumova, 2012; Jenkins, 2006). These convergence theories provide a foundation for understanding how blogging and social media interact with one another (Dumova, 2012).

Although the information provided above is insightful in consideration of the blogosphere's history, evolution, and functioning, there is still a gap in the literature that specifically addresses what these elements are likely pointing towards for the sphere's future and their implications for pro-bloggers operating within the sphere. The following analysis will address this gap.

METHODS, RESULTS, & ANALYSIS

In order to address the issue of the viability of pro-blogging in the future, I conducted interviews with 8 bloggers (6 experienced pro-bloggers, 1 new pro-blogger, and 1 personal blogger that had been working within the sphere since its inception) that focused on their prior experiences and success, their expectations for the future of the sphere, and their strategies for coping with the changes in the industry.

The interviews were conducted over e-mail, phone call, or videoconference in a semi-structured format. The average phone or videoconference interview averaged 40 minutes, after which I made a transcript of the recording in order to analyze the information in greater detail. Once all responses were gathered in a written format, I manually coded each interview in order

to tie together themes and look for similarities/differences across all of the data. While these interviews are particularly insightful for this research due to the interviewees being actively involved within the sphere, it must be noted that some responses may also be biased due to this very involvement. Nonetheless, the set of perspectives can still be considered broad enough to provide accuracy in assessing the sphere, as the interviewees have a wide set of backgrounds and experiences from which to judge the state of the blogosphere.

EVOLUTION OF THE BLOGOSPHERE

In order to address the viability of the future of the blogosphere, we need to first address the changes that the sphere has undergone in its most recent years. The below text summarizes the data collected from interviews addressing this point.

DEFINITION OF BLOGGING

The first notable change in the evolution of the blogosphere is the very definition blogging itself. As addressed in the Literature Review above, the sphere has undergone rapid changes that has brought into question what even constitutes as blogging. According to these bloggers—who did indeed have their own separate blog websites—the definition of a “blogger” has now transformed into the issue of being an “influencer.” In fact, over the course of the interviews, the word “influence” or “influencer” was used 15 times in relation to the function of or as a substitute for a “blogger.”

More specifically, one interviewee commented, “I just wrote about this for an industry conference that’s coming up... and one of the points is that a blogger is not a blogger. A blogger used to be a guy with a blog that wrote on WordPress usually, or in one spot, or whatever. Now a blogger—under that definition—it’s a bit more accurate to call them online influencers: people who have a following online. That can be a micro-blogger on Twitter. It can be a YouTuber; a

podcaster. It could be someone with a big Instagram account. It could be someone with a big SnapChat following.... So all we're talking about is...the delivery of content. On what platform are you delivering your content?" Thus, the definition of a blogger could be described as one who delivers influential content online and has a following. This definition focuses on a blogger's *function*.

Another interviewee supported this definition when he said, "You're asking me all about these tools of blogging because I have the timing and the privileges that allowed me to be active in this one medium and at the right time, but you know, all this stuff is kind of the same thing. It's almost like, is it blogging? Is it Twitter? Is it micro-blogging? Is it video blogging? It's like, there are tools that allow people to go online and share with each other." And while this interviewee also defined blogging as "reverse chronological writing on the Web somewhere," in light of the first statement, it is clear that blogging includes content delivery beyond that of text-based, written blogging.

A more extreme statement came from a person who denied the chance to be interviewed, saying "I don't even think 'blogging' has much of a sensible reverent anymore. The days when 'blogger' referred to a relatively coherent group of people and list of practices ended earlier this decade." As is clear from these statements, the term "blogger" has now evolved to mean something much different from its original usage, and the term itself may have dissolved into the more-encompassing word of "influencer." During one interview, the term "information entrepreneur" was also used to describe a blogger, which again points to the *function* of a blogger—that of sharing and influence—rather than the distinct features of the platform that the blogger uses.

LEVEL OF PROFESSIONALISM

The level of professionalism that blogging has taken on was another theme in the data. One interviewee commented, “I think of blogging old school, like, back when blogging started – you know, what we would call traditional blogging – was they were journaling their life, and they were bringing people into it and it was very personal. Most blogging I see today is very impersonal. It’s not that people don’t like me; it’s more that they’re interested in what I can do for them, what I can fix, or the solution that I can give them.” Likewise, speaking about the travel blogging industry in particular, another interviewee said, “The perception of travel blogging as a legitimate industry has grown greatly.... On the whole, the industry has become more professional.” In addition to this commentary, this interviewee also noted that many within the blogging industry had won awards in various writer and journalist associations and societies, which thereby demonstrates that blogging in general has become more accepted as a legitimate form of professional writing. Another travel blogger noted that when he first started, “no one was taking it seriously as a business...but eventually the travel industry has grown to recognize the value of independent publishers like myself.”

While these quotes address this change within the sphere most directly, it should be noted that every single blogger that I spoke with, including the solely personal blogger, recognized blogging as a legitimate form of professional business.

EFFECT OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

One of the most prominent changes within the technology industry has been the influence of mobile. Mobile and desktop run off of separate operating systems, which has implications for how bloggers may reach their audiences and continue the success of their businesses (i.e., using websites vs. using apps to reach audiences). While not every interviewee was asked about this phenomena (again, interviews were in a semi-structured format that took into account the

background and experiences of each blogger to form appropriate questions), the five bloggers who addressed this issue expressed a range of opinions on the matter. However, all five submitted that mobile was indeed growing; it was simply the implications of this growth that varied.

One blogger expressed a rather neutral stance toward the subject, saying, “Mobile is growing, but there is always going to be usage on the internet and through desktop computers. Just like any change in the world of online marketing and business, it’s all about adapting with the environment around you.” Another, on the other hand, expressed positive sentiments about the change, noting, “People are going online more and more because of our mobile devices. The amount of eyes on the Internet at any given time is expanding so quickly that, for like, in the historical scheme of things, we’re in a great time to start blogging.” He also added, “There’s very little you can do with an app that you can’t do with a website.... Apps probably can’t kill websites because web design technology is just advancing so quickly that you can do anything with a website that you want to do with it, and you maintain the ability to be accessible from other websites. You don’t have to download the app. So probably no – we don’t think that apps will kill the websites.” Thus, while mobile presents an opportunity for bloggers in the form of “more eyes,” it also does not necessarily present a threat due to the advanced technology of web design.

Another interviewee agreed to the opportunity of mobile for bloggers right now, but noted that mobile could very possibly overtake desktop in the future. Specifically, he said, “Well at the moment, I think it’s certainly complimentary. I’m not sure at the moment it’s fully taking over it, but I think it’s certainly moving towards that way. And you can almost see how Apple is really pushing towards the iOS kind of operating system with a lot of their devices. And you look

at places like YouTube and Facebook as well. Like YouTube, more than 50% of their views come from mobile. Facebook, I'm pretty sure it's more than 50% as well. It might even be a lot more. So mobile is definitely – it's huge. I think there's some applications though that will probably for still a long time still need desktop. But I think we might just see the ratios changing.”

From these sentiments, it is unclear whether or not mobile will “kill” the Internet; however, it is clear that mobile is and will continue growing into the foreseeable future. This fact has implications for how bloggers must engage their viewers. One blogger commented that with the advent of the iPhone and App Store, “there are now a million different ways to consume on your mobile device. So this not only impacts design, user experience, user interface, but it impacts people's attention spans and consumption habits, which impacts how you share content even when you're sharing it on your blog.” Thus, bloggers must be willing to adapt their blogs to even more formats than before, including not only the computer, but also the phone, tablet, game console, and TV as the ways in which one may access the Internet multiplies.

REVENUE DRIVERS

Because both the sphere itself and the definition of what constitutes a blog have changed, the revenue drivers have likewise evolved. One interviewee noted that “most of the travel blogging industry started with people selling links...and then people started bog farms.... This was the original income source.... Now it's really looked down upon. Google has more or less put a stop to that.” Thus, while many initial bloggers made money through selling links, this is no longer a viable option for *any* blogger, as Google has essentially made it a “non-issue.” Indeed, none of the bloggers I spoke with recounted this tactic as a source of revenue. The bloggers that I interviewed did, however, have several other revenue drivers on which to base

their business. It is interesting to note that these revenue drivers overlapped no matter what industry the blogger worked in. The revenue drivers and the number of bloggers who mentioned the source are as follows:

Revenue Driver	# of Bloggers Who Mentioned the Source
Ad Revenue (Display advertising, Google AdSense, etc.)	6
Affiliate Marketing	5
Creation of own Products/Services/Brands (ex: specialized information packets, consulting)	5
Sponsored Content	5
Media Appearances/Interviews	3
Acting as Spokesperson	3
External Content Creation (ex: for a company website, magazine, etc.)	2
Paid Press Trips	2

As is clear from the tabular data above, the four main sources of revenue for bloggers today are 1) ad revenue, 2) affiliate marketing, 3) creation of his/her own products/services/brands, and 4) sponsored content. It should be noted that these drivers are *not* listed in order of profitability, but by frequency mentioned. The important point here, as one blogger mentioned, is that really successful bloggers are “diversifying their revenues.”

SOCIAL MEDIA

The onset of social media has probably produced the biggest change within the sphere of blogging, especially in a professional, monetized sense. Not only has it allowed for the very definition of blogging to evolve into a broader encompassment, it has fundamentally “changed the way content is being shared and discovered,” meaning that the very foundation of how bloggers find, interact with, and engage their audiences has transformed. Due to the vast influence of this shift on the blogosphere, every interviewee was asked about social media’s impact on their blogs in an effort to determine the relative positive and negatives effects produced by the change.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has influenced the blogosphere in a number of ways. The below table represents the major impacts mentioned by the interviewees, determined to be major by the number of times each was mentioned in relation to social media. The top 3 are listed.

Impact	Example Quote
Gaining Followers	“The big audience-building activity happens with the personal brand, and that all happens through social media essentially.”
Engagement	“Social media is great for engagement.... With over 2 billion users spread across the major social network, it makes it a lot easier for people to find, share and engage with your content.”
Brand Building	“When people come to your website and they don’t see a social media presence, they don’t

	<p>see a conversation taking place around your brand or even around the person behind the brand, a big question mark goes up in their mind.... And I think that's where social media can come in extremely handy to build that social proof.”</p>
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PLATFORMS USED

In addition, every individual pro-blogger interviewed used multiple social media platforms as a part of their blogging strategy. The different social media networks these bloggers use include Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google, Instagram, and YouTube. The combination in which these platforms were used varied upon individual blogger preferences, industry, and chosen strategy. However, it should be noted that *each blogger only heavily utilized two or three social media platforms* as part of their blogging strategy. A few interviewees mentioned having multiple accounts set up beyond their two or three main social media networks (and including other social media networks, such as Periscope and SnapChat), but they were not heavily utilized (or utilized at all!) for driving their businesses.

EFFECT ON BLOGOSPHERE AND PRO-BLOGGING VIABILITY

Each interviewee was asked about the impact of social media on his/her blog and/or on the blogosphere in general. The responses can be sorted into positive, negative, and neutral sentiments. Also, many of the bloggers recognized both positive and negative effects of social media on the blogosphere.

Positive Effects

Regarding social media's impact on the blogosphere in general, one interviewee noted that "Social media can't kill it because social media is a part of it," emphasizing the fact that blogging and social media have become mutually reinforcing. Echoing this, another blogger mentioned, "Twitter doesn't determine whether I'm successful at [being an information entrepreneur]. It's 'Twitter is part of my overall strategy,'" which displays how social media has largely become a part of blogging strategy, not as a means by which to replace blogging as a whole. This same interviewee mentioned that social media, and in particular new networks, allow a person to have "much greater visibility as a big fish in that small pond" and "that participation in social media can help you connect and amplify your potential" to seize economic opportunity online. Agreeing with this, another blogger commented, "the number of channels available to share your content, but also to monetize your content, has completely exploded." Thus, the positive effect of social media on the blogosphere is that it has *expanded* the blogosphere into new forms of content creation, which can allow for greater opportunity for personal and professional bloggers alike.

Negative Effects

In addition to positive effects, social media has also had a negative impact on the blogosphere. One blogger mentioned that, due to social media, "the blog itself has become less important.... If you've got hundreds of thousands or millions of followers on Instagram, it isn't really necessary.... The reality is, I could delete my website" (though not necessarily should).

The other negative effects of social media expressed by the interviewed bloggers have more to do with blogging strategy rather than with the blogosphere in general, namely when considering *time commitment* and *social network reliability*. Regarding the first, one blogger commented, "So, [social media] is actually one of the hardest things about blogging because you

are literally required to be on things that suck up your time. And, like any small business, the more efficiently you can spend your time, the more money you're going to make. So it's hard." Another interviewee commented, "And I think one of the things I struggle with is, as an artist working in this area...I sort of take one piece of content and syndicate it across all these networks because I don't know where it's really going to reach someone. Is it really going to reach someone on, you know, this site or that site? I have no idea, so I have to post to all of them, and that takes a lot of time."

Regarding the second negative effect of social media on blogging strategy—social network reliability—several interviewees voiced concerns about whether or not the social media network, or the features that those networks boasted that were utilized by bloggers, would even exist in the future. One interviewee who gained a lot of followers from Pinterest said, "Pinterest may drop off the face of the universe," while another noted that even if you build an enormous following on particular networks, "they may go away in six months and take all your work with them." Thus, social media presents not only opportunities for gaining followers, but it also poses threats to bloggers in *losing* followers due to social media's ever-changing landscapes.

Neutral Effects

Still other interviewees noted that the enlarged presence of social media on the Internet did not affect their blogging business in terms of profitability. One interviewee said, "[the integration of blogging-like features into social media platforms] hasn't personally affected myself or my sites at all. I will always keep the content on my own sites so I have 100% control and ownership over my content." Another commented, "I mean, for myself in my personal life, it's not as important for me to have an enormous following as it is for other people because my career is heading in a direction that doesn't require me to have 10 million travelers being

influenced by my blog. My career is going more in a way where people are asking me for advice about blogging and more consulting work.” Thus, due to pursuing particular blogging strategies, social media may have very little impact on the actual business and profitability side of the blog. Different revenue drivers and management tactics may negate other adverse affects.

FUTURE OF BLOGOSPHERE

Having considered the biggest changes in the blogosphere up until this point, we now turn to the issue of projected changes of the sphere within the near future. Interviewees were asked about 1) the likelihood of the blogosphere continuing into the future and 2) the forms in which the sphere is likely to shift toward.

CONTINUATION OF THE SPHERE

The unanimous conclusion of every blogger interviewed was that the blogosphere would continue well into the future. One blogger expressed the sentiment plainly, saying, “There is always going to be a way to make money with online content and blogging,” arguing that “Content is king and if you are excellent at making it, your opportunities are endless.” Even the newest pro-blogger that I interviewed said, “I think that definitely, blogging is going to be around for awhile.”

Another interviewee expressed it in terms of value, noting, “If you follow someone for a purpose, if you’re giving them a purpose and you’re not just wasting time, if you’re actually helping them, I don’t see this going away, no matter what. Even if social media starts getting less effective.” And also, “I think that some form of blogging – it may not be [called] ‘blogging’ – it may look differently; it may be an influencer.... Like, they may not even need a website. But essentially blogging, or making money from blogging, is that you are an influencer.... So, personally, I see it going more that we’re replacing magazines type of deal.”

A fourth blogger said it this way: “I think it’s possible to say that there have never been more blogging platforms available than there are today.... If the heyday of blogging was like, 2004 or something like that, it’s a lot easier now and it’s all free! Everybody’s like, blog away, blog all you want, it’s free. So, I would not write the obituary of blogging just yet, and I would in fact say that this desire to sort of update the world is timeless.” In addition, another blogger commented, “Movies did not kill radio. TV has not killed movies. The Internet has not killed TV. We have the capacity to enjoy our content and communication in many different forms.” These quotes demonstrate the undisputed opinion of the interviewees that the blogosphere is still and will continue thriving into the near future.

SHIFTS IN FORMAT

Interviewees were also asked about where they saw the blogosphere moving towards in terms of format (i.e., text, video, podcasting, etc.). The responses were mixed, particularly in regard to whether or not video was bound to overshadow text-based blogging. For example, one blogger said, “Blogging will continue to change, but I think text will be the standard for awhile. Google needs to see and read text for it to rank content. Video and YouTube content continues to grow, but text is still more in play.” At the same time, this blogger has also shifted some of his content into the video and podcasting formats, saying, “I’ve recently started to do more video and podcasting. This allows me to build a better relationship with my audiences, versus them just reading text all the time.” Another text-based blogger said, “I would say we’re going to have to shift with whatever – you have to go where your readers are.... I don’t have any plans right now to do video or anything like that, but I think going forward, that’s probably a smart move. Podcasting is the same way.” Another expanded on the possibilities of podcasting (rather than

video) because “you can’t consume video everywhere and anywhere because you need your visual attention, not just your audio attention. Podcasting, people can listen to while they run.”

One other interviewee expressed it this way: “You know, you ask what I’ve done to be able to continue. I continue to shift my medium, so I always want to experiment. I like experimenting with different forms, so for me I shifted to video recently.” The newest pro-blogger in the set of interviewees said, “I’ve talked about in my 2016 [text-based] blog that maybe I would do YouTube videos.... I think something, too, that we’re seeing a lot more of is the live video with Periscope, or Facebook Live just rolled out. So there’s definitely an opportunity to grow there because it’s new, so not a lot of people are doing it.” However, she also argued that with “text blogging, you can be on your lunch break reading a blog, but you’re not going to watch a 12-minute video.”

The video-based blogger that I interviewed suggested, “in terms of getting an edge in the future, I think, as a business in general, you definitely have to think about video. If you’re online, you’ve got to think about video as part of your strategy. Maybe it’s not part of your main strategy, but certainly have it as part of your strategy.” Echoing this, one of the text-based bloggers formerly mentioned said, “Getting the perfect combination of text, images, video and different content is going to determine the overall success of sites.” Another said that blogging “is moving towards more engaging things [like video and podcasting].... You feel more of a bond with them than if you’re just reading something.”

As is clear from these responses, the blogosphere is likely to shift more greatly towards video/podcasting in the future; the extent of the shift is what is debated.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CHANGES IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

One issue brought up during the course of the interviews is that people wanting to enter the sphere should “stop thinking it’s easy to make money with a blog and don’t expect to make money quick.” Repeatedly throughout the interviews, the bloggers emphasized that “You have to look at this as a very long game.” However, if this is true, then bloggers must find a long-term strategy for profitability in an ever-changing landscape! Below is a compiled list of the most frequently mentioned strategies for successfully managing the reality of the transforming blogosphere.

GO NICHE

Five of the eight bloggers specifically mentioned the importance of cultivating an extremely niche audience in order to be successful. One interviewee said, “In general, you get really clear on who in particular you want to talk to,” and another noted that a blogger must “know your target audience, really, really well because there can be a million other people talking about the same thing that you’re talking about, but if you have a really targeted audience and you know exactly who you’re talking to...you’re going to be fine.” Similar statements from the other 3 bloggers can be found within the interview text, and a sixth blogger implied such statements when talking about his own niche audience. Thus, cultivating a niche audience within the broad sphere is likely one of the most important tactics for managing the changes in the space, as having a specific target audience gives the blogger an indication about which choices to make (ex: which social media networks to target) in every other part of his/her business strategy.

That being said, one blogger noted that monetary success in blogging “depends on what the niche is.” And another one posited an opposing viewpoint to this general wisdom, saying, “There are people who believe that in order to be a successful blogger you need to have a very

niche topic you can own, and I disagree with that philosophy. I think that's *one* way to be a successful blogger. But the other way, which is very common in our community, is to have a unique *voice*." Thus, while choosing a niche topic may be one way to manage the space, it may not be the only way.

ADAPTATION AND USING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The ability to adapt was also a strong point in many of the interviews. One interviewee stated, "Just like any change in the world of online marketing and business, it's all about adapting to the environment around you." Another reiterated this point when she said, "I mean, everything on the Internet is going to change constantly, so you need to be open to new social media; you need to be willing to jump on things quickly; you need to be able to kind of roll with the punches." Yet again, another blogger commented that to engage readers more dramatically, a blogger might "shift mediums." Another suggested that a successful blogger in the future will "have to have your own product." Thus, a blogger's ability to adapt to changes is crucial.

Related to this point and as is clear from the entirety of this thesis, a blogger has a plethora of mediums to choose from to engage his/her audience. However, it is suggested by the interviews that bloggers should *choose only a few social media platforms* in which to engage their audience in (but still stay flexible to add another/switch platforms as necessary). An interesting point on this matter is that, by and large, the interviewees chose those platforms with which they are most comfortable. For example, one interviewee said, "So, you'd find most bloggers will choose a few social platforms that they're best at and run with them." Another said, "I think what's wonderful is that there's a range of [platforms] and you can sort of find what you're most comfortable with, you know?"

This being said, many bloggers also utilized social media platforms that they did not personally like interacting on because it was where his/her target audience was located. The strategy for managing this conundrum was to hire out the management of that platform to someone else. For example, one interviewee said, “I’ve got a person that does Facebook for me because I hate Facebook,” while another said, “I pay a virtual assistant to go help me do Pinterest stuff...so I don’t spend much time on it, but that sends a lot of traffic to my blog.”

KEEP AN EXTERNAL BLOG WEBSITE

This strategy was mentioned by four of the eight interviewees, so it is less agreed-upon than the two above and may still be up for debate. Nonetheless, because half of the interviewees mentioned this tactic, I’ve included it here as a possible way to manage the change of the sphere.

With the blogosphere evolving so quickly, it is interesting that maintaining an external website, rather than simply relying upon other forms of blogging (such as micro-blogging on Twitter or video blogging on YouTube), is still a recommended strategy. However, commenting upon this, one interviewee said, “One problem that you find with social media as a blogger...is that investing too much in any one particular social media – we call it platforms – investing too much in a platform that you don’t own is a risky investment and is not wise...In the beginning, they give away everything and everything and everything. And then, as time goes by, they have to figure out ways to monetize it. So those who are profiting in some way from their social media, they find ways to make them pay to reach those customers. So, for a blogger, it makes the most sense still to have your own blog and a list of emails. People who subscribe to your email list is the most valuable because anything else can get taken away, or anything else can turn into MySpace.” Likewise, the video blogger I spoke with said, “The biggest thing is that with all of these social media networks and sites is that you don’t own your profile.... So what happens if

you spend two or three years building a following there, building content, building relationships, and then something happens?... So what I always love doing is redirecting people back into my own world, where I can control it, where I can own it.” A third interviewee commented, “I will always keep the content on my own sites so I have 100% control and ownership over my content.” Thus, one way to manage the ever-changing sphere is to have a “home base” website in which all of the other social media and blogging platforms redirect followers to. Using this method, some of the threats presented by social media (such as the social network’s reliability) can be neutralized.

Other bloggers accepted the idea that a blogger in the future may or may not have a “home base” website; that “it isn’t really necessary.” Still, it is interesting to note that the newest pro-blogger first began on social media and then, once she decided to get serious about pro-blogging, created an external blog website. Thus, it seems that while it may be feasible to pro-blog without an external site, it may be much more viable long-term to create one.

VIABILITY OF PRO-BLOGGING IN THE FUTURE

I also discussed with interviewees the viability of pro-blogging in the future when considering everything we had talked about (internal and external changes of the sphere, management tactics, etc.). The responses were largely optimistic, but with caveats.

OPTIMISTIC VIEWPOINTS

On the optimistic side, the continued growth of the sphere is a sign of future viability. One blogger said, “Yes, [pro-blogging is] completely viable. You have to figure that I was brand new 18 months ago and I grew this much in 18 months. I don’t think the market has changed so much in 18 months that no one could possibly be successful. I think the secret is going to be that people will give up because they think it’s a really saturated market. They think like, well,

there's too much competition; it's too hard...[but] I think that as people go into this, if they have fantastic content, they know their target audiences, they know exactly who they're going to help, and how they're going to help them, then this is a great job for them." This particular interviewee made roughly \$40,000 in February alone.

Another blogger referenced the growth of the sphere as an opportunity as well, but more with an international perspective, saying, "The amount of eyes on the Internet at any given time is expanding so quickly that, for in the historical scheme of things, we're in a great time to start blogging. Once we've reached peak Internet, that's when it'll be really, really hard." He also stated, "the Internet globally is expanding still rapidly. Internet penetration into places that don't have it yet is expanding and the use is expanding. That's not necessarily the case so much in the United States as it is in, say, China.... Blogging is a more saturated market [in the U.S.]. It is definitely still growing. I would say that yes, yes, there are still definitely opportunities. There's always going to be opportunities...But, in the United States, it's more competitive than other places." Thus, even if someone is operating in a saturated market like the United States, there are still opportunities for these people (particularly if they serve an extremely niche market) and pro-blogging is still viable; it simply may be *more* viable abroad. This sentiment was largely echoed by the other bloggers, as well.

In addition, growth of complimentary sites like social media can also increase the viability of blogging. One interviewee said, "I think that any medium can serve you as an information entrepreneur." Another referenced Periscope and Facebook Live as "an opportunity to grow because it's new, so not a lot of people are doing it." This same blogger also commented on how the search for influencers also makes pro-blogging more viable because "[businesses] are always looking for people who are up-and-coming."

CAVEATS

The single biggest theme about what does/does not make pro-blogging viable in the future had not to do with the state of the sphere itself, but the amount of effort it takes to make the business work. A lack of barrier to entry, increased competition, the easy availability of “junk” information, and social media reliability all serve as threats to the viability as pro-blogging as a career. Every blogger I talked with mentioned in one form or another that “good” blogging took hard work, effort, and time to make it a thriving blog (and business). Succinctly said by one interviewee, “Blogging is easy, making money with a blog is not.”

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

After analyzing and coding 75 pages of interviews and surveying the results presented above, I can conclude that both the blogosphere and the career of pro-blogging are both viable for the foreseeable future. While there are indeed many changes taking place within the sphere, it seems that the overwhelming majority of these changes have largely *complimented, rather than detracted from*, the blogosphere. Social media is mainly an extension of blogging itself, but it also feeds into the more traditional external-website-based blogs and helps redirect more traffic to the sites. The blogosphere is not dissolving into social media, but rather social media is feeding into the blogosphere. In addition, pro-blogging remains viable due to the number of revenue drivers that bloggers may pursue and the availability of multiple formats in which the blogger may engage his/her audience. The expansion of the sphere into these multiple formats, and the willingness of pro-bloggers to adapt to them, is what has kept the blogosphere alive and growing, even with low barriers to entry. The evolution of the sphere is the very thing that has allowed bloggers to continue to compete successfully.

Concerning the future of the blogosphere in terms of form, it seems that video and podcasting are likely to catch hold in a strong way. Bloggers would be well advised to include some form of video or podcasting into their blogs, though it may not need to be the primary form of the blog. This depends, of course, on the target audience of the blogger; but, in general, the trend is moving towards a more rich, engaging format. Live video presents a particularly strong opportunity.

One other future possibility for the space that may be drawn from the data is the consolidation and expansion of blog niches. Professional blogs are essentially extraordinarily niche media companies, which, as mentioned by the interviewees, take a lot of hard work. Hiring team members to help manage the load allows bloggers to produce more content and, subsequently, earn more revenue. It may also help them adapt to the ever-changing technological environment and increase their flexibility and influence in a more expanded niche. In addition, the merging of blogging and other diverse forms – such as retail, catalogs, manufacturing, etc. – could occur as blogging’s influence continues to evolve and increase in professionalism.

The most surprising finding of the study was that bloggers only heavily use 2-3 social media networks. At the beginning of this study, I had expected bloggers to be heavily involved in close to 4-5 different networks to reach the broadest audience possible and thus gain the most amount of amount of followers. However, going *deep* into a few social media platforms rather than *broad* across many seems to be the unanimous approach to social media and blogging.

The ideas and findings of this thesis are relevant to pro-bloggers in a number of ways. The thesis addresses the most relevant changes and projections for the blogosphere and also provides strategies by which to manage these changes. Because the interviews were conducted with pro-bloggers from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and niche industries, pro-

bloggers are provided with a broader sense of the blogosphere as a whole that may cause them to alter their strategy for the future, potentially providing the chance for higher profitability and sustainability. For those looking to enter the sphere, the thesis provides a solid background of information on which to utilize when deciding his/her competitive strategy.

There are limitations to the conclusions found within this thesis, as only eight bloggers were interviewed. For future studies, it might be interesting to interview those who have exited the sphere, academics, or even those within the Millennial generation in an effort to gauge the future interest in the career. Interviewing those who are not so intimately connected to the sphere may provide a broader perspective on the blogosphere's future. One could also do a more in-depth study of how much money pro-bloggers have made over time in order to more quantitatively gauge the viability of the career in the future.

CONCLUSION

From its beginnings as a space for online journaling to its transformation into a monetized industry, the blogosphere has continually changed. These changes have required those within the space to continually adapt their tactics and strategies in order to find success. The rise of social media, mobile, podcasting, and video all have implications for how bloggers in the future will need to adapt, and those hoping to continue their success must figure out the best combination of platforms and features to fully engage their audiences and monetize their blogs. However, due to the evolution of a blogger into an influencer, businesspersons within the space now have multiple revenue drivers from which to stabilize their blog; selling links and posting advertisements are no longer the only means by which to generate revenue.

Though the exact details of the future of the space are unknown, it can generally be expected that the blogosphere and pro-blogging will continue to thrive even in the face of high

competition. The evolution of the sphere and, as the interviewees would argue, hard work and a plan, have been the keys to the profession's enduring success.

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