

About the photography blogger

Andrew Fitzgibbon, 31 July 2021.

Introduction

As part of a coursework submission for a BA (Hons) Photography degree, this short article considers the role and practices of the blogger within the photography industry. It includes practical advice from established bloggers, and practice-based research undertaken by the author. Also, it examines the relationship between the blog and social media.

Less than two decades ago, Kris Cohen described how a photoblogger fantasized about capturing and immediately sharing images online without breaking the stride of his day (Cohen, 2005:892). Since then, notions of blogging have rapidly evolved, and mobile technology has become normal. In 1998 there were only 23 blogs. The 'Blogger' platform was released in 2002 and by 2005 there were 50 million blogs (Garden, 2012). By 2020, the number of blogs is reported as 600 million (Nick G., 2019) with over 500 million of these on Tumblr, the blogging/social networking platform (Eira, 2020). It is impossible to know how many are active. Nonetheless, the huge number offers a feel for the scale of blogging.

Unlike in 1998, now almost everyone is a photographer - smartphone technology and social media have fuelled the transformation of photography from a democratic art into a cultural obsession. Arguably, the infinite expansion of photography has led to its infinite regression; it is everywhere and nowhere (Cohen, 2005:892). This is the context in which I consider the photography blog and a struggle to be noticed.

My research has drawn on blogs, academic papers, practical books and videos, and practice-based research through setting up a blog. Importantly for insights into practical experiences, I video-interviewed three established bloggers and exchanged emails with a fourth¹ (hereinafter called 'interviewees'). I am grateful for their time and contributions. That some of them did not consider themselves to be 'bloggers' prompted me to consider the ubiquitous term and how it might be defined.

Mary Garden questioned whether defining 'blog' was a fool's errand or a necessary undertaking and challenged the assumption of consensus around a definition (Garden, 2012). I follow Garden's good advice and specify what I mean in the context of this article. I

¹ Janet Broughton (definitelydreaming.com), Carole Evans (caroleevans.co.uk), Johnny Mobasher (streetphotography.com), Robin Whalley (thelightweightphotographer.com, lenscraft.co.uk).

consider a blog to be a type of website that includes units of content (typically a post), each having a title, a URL (web address), a named author and date-stamp. The blog then grows through a succession of posts, rather than remaining as static pages.

Types of photography blog

Bloggers within the photographic industry are a broad church and categorising them helps in understanding the roles, motivations, and approaches. Based on posts such as the '47 best photography blogs in the world' (*Sandra Roussy, 2018*) and '23 Photography Blogs to Bookmark Right Now' (*Format Team, 2021*) alongside my own review of blogs, I have listed six types, along with examples:

- **Photographer / artist** – these often include the artist's thoughts on the creative process, information on ongoing work and exhibitions, and generally form part of websites showing and selling work. For example, Alec Soth (www.alecsoth.com) or Laura El-Tantawy (www.lauraeltantawy.com).
- **Genre-based** – such as street, travel, and landscape photography. For example, www.streetphotography.com or www.onlandscape.co.uk.
- **News** – featuring a broad range of news and reviews including events, exhibitions, and equipment. For example, www.petapixel.com.
- **Magazine** – including purely online offerings or extensions of paper editions. Like traditional magazines, their editorial content is varied. For example, www.featureshoot.com.
- **Educational** – targeted at helping photographers improve their work, often dealing with technical aspects of the medium. For example, www.lenscraft.co.uk and www.phlearn.com.
- **Organisations** – including equipment manufacturers, art/photography galleries, and photographer collectives. For example, www.magnumphotos.com and www.openeye.org.uk

Some blogs cover more than one type, but each tends to have a primary theme.

Almost all the blogs I surveyed included one or more links to social media accounts and I next consider the interaction between the blog and social media.

Is social media eating the blog?

The blog format, dating back to 1998, is the old man of Web 2.0 (websites that allow user participation). Twitter and Facebook weren't widely used until 2006 and are sometimes

referred to as microblogging platforms. The photo sharing platform, Flickr was founded in 2004. Instagram, with its focus on the instant sharing of mobile phone photos through its app was not founded until 2010 (Samur, 2018). For anyone wanting to casually share their images, or to enjoy the dopamine fuelled highs of collecting 'likes' and 'followers' (Miller, 2021) there is perhaps no need for a blog. However, I suggest that blogging remains an essential tool for those wishing to have an online space that reflects their own identity. A blog gives a place where they can share more complex ideas and information; build a more intimate relationship with readers through email lists; and sell their work. All the interviewees mentioned the importance of creating an owned mailing list, allowing direct communication with readers, independent of social media platforms. One interviewee thought in terms of 'channels', with Instagram and YouTube driving traffic to their blog, adding to the mailing list, and opportunities to inform and sell. Jolie O'Dell describes the blog as a 'hub' connecting other online personae (O'Dell, 2013:76). It can also be used to connect to e-commerce platforms to sell work.

For the time being at least, the blog seems at little risk from being devoured by social media in an internet turf war.

Blogging in practice

I examine the blogger's role using broad areas of activity identified during my research, and highlighting practical insights offered by the interviewees.

Purpose

The introduction touched on the myriad of blogs vying for readers' attention. All interviewees concurred that clarity of purpose and consistency (or slow evolution) was vital to a successful blog – readers should know what to expect. If they don't get it, they will easily unsubscribe. The internet is a swamp of distractions and Brad Merrill (entrepreneur and Udemy instructor) stresses the importance of identifying a 'niche' in which to work (Merrill, s.d.). One interviewee was clear that he wanted his blog to share the knowledge and art of street photography. Another aimed to provide free information on photography techniques and sell eBooks on the back of it.

Motivation

Being motivated to put commitment into the blog is vital if it is not to join the scrap heap of inactive websites. Interviewees evidenced however that the source of motivation tends to evolve over time. One started with just wanting a space of their own to show work in series (rather than within the constraints of social media), which then evolved into a small business

selling textures for photo composites and providing copywriting services for other photographers. Another's started with sharing an interest in the early micro 4/3 cameras (later mirrorless), then branching into a separate blog with clearly written technical information for photographers, borne out of frustration with poorly written instructions. However, for all interviewees, the sharing of their own passion for photography and work formed part of the motivation.

Technical

There are many different platforms for blogging, including some artist/photography website builder applications (eg Squarespace) that offer a variety of template layouts (Ellyn Kail, 2020). Platforms are not all equal and serve different purposes. For example, Wordpress.com sites offer limited customisation in comparison to the self-hosted Wordpress.org sites, where the blogger can select from many 'plugins' to add additional functionality. One interviewee said that with hindsight they would use a paid website builder application, rather than employ a developer to manage technical aspects of a Wordpress.org site. Others, with more technical confidence, felt that the flexibility and value Wordpress.org offered was worth the time commitment required. Interviewees typically used Mailchimp to manage their mailing lists and this platform involves its own technical learning to set up. There are books dedicated to this subject, for example 'The Ultimate Guide to Email Marketing for Business' (Gunelius, 2018).

Depending on how the blog is used, there are also legal and transaction tax implications to consider. For example, personal data protection legislation and advertising standards requirements, when affiliate or influencer activities are undertaken (Advertising Standards Authority, Committee of Advertising Practice, s.d.). One interviewee explained that their blog was linked to third-party online store so that any sales tax requirements and transactional activities were dealt with automatically, reducing the administrative burden.

There is a trade-off between investing either time or money in technical expertise and the level of customisation and expanded usage. It is apparent that basic blogging packages and website builders offer limited scope for customisation, do not often have the capability to incorporate email lists, or support e-commerce activities.

Content Creation

Creating interesting content that keeps subscribers engaged is the keystone of blogging and something that the interviewees found challenging in different ways. One mentioned numerous offers to write for the blog were received, but that the quality was rarely good; this was partly resolved by working with editors with an interest in the subject area. Another

commented that writing itself was not an issue but coming up with fresh ideas for content was more so. Good practice for blogging suggests that regular and sustained posting is needed to maintain a committed readership (Merrill, s.d.). One of my interviewees followed this practice, keeping a large notepad to schedule and organise posts. Others took a more relaxed approach, posting only when they had an idea for content. Research on search engine optimisation suggests that regularly updated blogs with substantial content of over 1,000 words reach more readers; with the regularity of updates generally being more important than their frequency (Crestodina, 2014).

Promoting the Blog

None of the interviewees used paid advertising to promote their blogs. One did try a promotional Google Ads offer but didn't find it to be that successful. Instead, the focus was on search engine optimisation (SEO) to give their content the best chance of being prioritised in users' web browsers. Much like using emailing lists, SEO is another activity the blogger must manage. In essence, the interviewees' strategies were to adopt a domain name that would stick in readers minds and to create relevant, high-quality content. Also, as mentioned earlier, social media was important in driving traffic to the blogs. One interviewee mentioned the effectiveness of YouTube in this regard and valued it despite the time required to make video content. Another strategy adopted was to write articles or seek features in well-established blogs to create traffic to the blogger's own site – known as guest-blogging.

Sustaining business through a blog

A blog itself is not a business but a platform for other business activities. One statistic suggests that only 8% of bloggers make sufficient money from their blog to sustain their families (Wang, 2020). One interviewee emphasised the importance of having a clear idea of how the blog was going to be monetised and designing it from the outset with that in mind. Another commented on how many photography related blogs appeared to run photography competitions for an entry fee as a business model, with the promise of featuring winners on their popular websites and social media streams. I feel that there are ethical considerations around this, particularly for competitions securing generous rights for image use as part of the terms and conditions of entry. Interviewees commented that they must feel comfortable with anything shared on their blog and have hence declined approaches for paid reviews.

Alongside selling their own work, some bloggers complement their income through 'affiliate links', whereby advertisers pay commission for click-throughs that result in sales. Such affiliations must be disclosed on a blog to comply with advertising standards. Despite the

ease of joining affiliate programmes, discretion is required as blogs are likely to become unattractive to readers when loaded with advertising banners, pop-ups, and advertorials.

There are costs associated with running a blog, including hosting and the blogger's time working on it, which also need to be factored into a business plan.

It is easy to become distracted and immersed in the details of setting up, designing, and administering a blog. However, as several interviewees mentioned, the main purpose of the blog should always be kept in mind.

Conclusion

Just as photography democratised art, and mobile technology transformed photography into a cultural obsession, the internet and the blog have democratised mass-communication. Anyone with a laptop and internet connection has the potential for their words and images to reach vast audiences through blogging. However, with vast numbers of blogs comes the struggle to be noticed, which emphasises the importance of the practices and expertise shared by the interviewees in this article. I end by summarising their advice to the new blogger:

- Clarity of purpose - be clear on the reasons for blogging and plan how to achieve objectives. Pick a business model and understand how it will generate money ethically.
- Commitment to doing – the important thing is to start; don't try to do everything at once or worry about perfection; begin with what you have, be helpful to people and enjoy it.
- Create strong content - focus on relevant and regular content creation without being too distracted by the work of website maintenance.

References

- Advertising Standards Authority, Committee of Advertising Practice (s.d.) New Platforms, Same Protections. At: <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/blog-new-platforms-same-protections.html> (Accessed 16/06/2021).
- Cohen, K. R. (2005) 'What does the photoblog want?' In: *Media, Culture & Society* 27 (6) pp.883–901.
- Crestodina, A. (2014) *How often should I blog? Blogging frequency and content strategy*. At: <https://www.orbitmedia.com/blog/how-often-should-blog/> (Accessed 28/07/2021).
- Eira, A. (2020) *Number of Tumblr Blogs in 2021/2022: User Demographics, Growth, and Revenue*. At: <https://financesonline.com/number-of-tumblr-blogs/> (Accessed 29/07/2021).
- Ellyn Kail (2020) *9 Artist and Photographer website builders you should know*. At: <https://www.featureshoot.com/2020/11/9-artist-and-photographer-website-builders-you-should-know/> (Accessed 16/06/2021).
- Format Team (2021) *23 Photography Blogs To Bookmark Right Now*. At: <https://www.format.com/magazine/resources/photography/photography-blogs> (Accessed 16/06/2021).
- Garden, M. (2012) 'Defining blog: A fool's errand or a necessary undertaking' In: *Journalism* 13 (4) pp.483–499.
- Gunelius, S. (2018) *Ultimate Guide to Email Marketing for Business*. Irvine: Entrepreneur Press.
- Merrill, B. (s.d.) *Blogging Masterclass: How To Build A Successful Blog In 2021*. [Online training course Udemy [online]]. At: <https://www.udemy.com> (Accessed 15/06/2021).
- Miller, J. A. (2021) 'Opinion | Social media addiction: how social media companies function like casinos' In: *UWIRE Text* 10/02/2021 p.1.
- Nick G. (2019) *29 Shocking Blogging Statistics. Is Blogging Dead in 2021?*. At: <https://techjury.net/blog/blogging-statistics/> (Accessed 18/06/2021).
- O'Dell, J. (2013) *Blogging for Photographers: Explore Your Creativity and Build Your Audience*. Abingdon, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. At: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucreative-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1659194> (Accessed 16/06/2021).
- Samur, A. (2018) *The History of Social Media: 29+ Key Moments*. At: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/history-social-media/> (Accessed 29/07/2021).
- Sandra Roussy (2018) *47 Best Photography Blogs in the World*. At: <https://www.photoblog.com/learn/best-photography-blogs/> (Accessed 16/06/2021).
- Wang, H. (2020) *121 Blogging Statistics for 2020*. At: <https://getcodeless.com/blogging-statistics/> (Accessed 18/06/2021).