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Into the blogosphere

Women find a voice and a community on Internet blogs

By Taylor Eisenman

Jeneane Sessum has worked as a public relations writer for small businesses and Fortune 500 companies in Atlanta, Ga. for the past 20 years, but she never found her own voice until she began blogging. "Blogging helped me find and have opinions, which transferred into my regular life," she said.

Sessum began writing allied, her own blog—a weblog, a kind of public daily journal online—in November 2001. Sessum writes about "loss, love, and life, not necessarily in that order." That following February, Sessum founded Blog Sisters, a group blog that now includes more than 100 female members.

"I started it as a place for women to exercise their voices online because I felt like that is what blogging had done for me, given me a chance to exercise my voice and take that back into the real world and give me more confidence," she said.

Creating community online

Blog Sisters is just one of many female group blogs on the Internet. Minnesota Association of Women Bloggers (MAWB Squad, http://brainstorming.typepad.com/mawb_squad) was started by two women last February because some members were having trouble keeping up with their daily blogs. "A lot of us are moms, and some of us work, and it is hard to keep your momentum and to get something up everyday if it is just you," said Sandy, one of MAWB's founders. "We just thought it was an opportunity to combine forces."

More than just an online community, however, bloggers are getting together face to face on a regular basis.

The MAWB Squad plans on getting away for a weekend together in the near future. "With our busy lives we are not as able to hang out in the neighborhood as we used to and form communities. I really see it as another method to form communities and to have a voice," Sandy said.

Amy Lauter, a graduate professor at the University of Minnesota, agrees. "Blogging builds a sense of community. It gives people a sense of power to be able to just put down their opinions and voice themselves on their own website," said Lauter. But, one aspect of blogging Lauter finds disheartening is its coverage in mainstream media as an adult male political phenomenon.

"We are seeing more focus in mass media on blogs that are created by men. When

in fact, the statistics show that more women are blogging than men," Lauter said.

Who's online?

One study published in "Into the Blogosphere," a collection of scholarly materials covering blogging, looked at a sample of media coverage of bloggers and found that male bloggers were mentioned 88 percent of the time and women bloggers just 12 percent. Is that because more men are blogging? Not according to a 2003 study by Perseus Development Corporation, which estimated that 56 percent of blogs are created by women.

Lauter said she believes the disparity in media coverage is a reflection of our society's values. "I think that gets at another kind of inequity in terms of value. Valuing some of these blogs that are more political, more business-oriented, and privileging them over other kinds of blogs that may not be as edgy. A privileging of socially constructed 'male issues' over 'women's issues,'" said Lauter.

A broken link

And male bloggers are helping to reinforce that privilege. Clancy Ratliff, a Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota who is researching blogs, found that the most popular male bloggers rarely include women bloggers on their blogroll—a list of weblinks to other blogs the author visits and references frequently.

Ratliff's pilot study found that on the top 10 blogs defined by Technorati, a search engine that tracks more than 7 million blogs, just 16 percent of blogrolls provide links to female bloggers. Men are linking with men.

Some of the reasons for the male bias may harken back to more traditional forms of communication, Ratliff said.

"I think it is kind of a self-perpetuating mechanism where male bloggers see all the op-ed pieces by men about foreign policy and blog about that," said Ratliff. She said she feels the lack of women in the newsroom contributes to this disparity both in the real world and online, and helps to marginalize the issues women are blogging about. "A lot of times women's issues like reproductive rights are not as often treated as serious political issues like the war in Iraq," Ratliff said.

How the other half lives

For those men that do visit women's blogs, Ratliff said she sees opportunities for new understandings among genders. "The men who do read feminist women's blogs get a really rich perspective on the news stories women choose to link to and their interpretations and responses to them," said Ratliff.

That understanding isn't just happening in American culture. A BBC News story reported that Iranian women are using their blogs as a place to talk freely about taboo subjects. One woman interviewed for the story said that she had received emails from men telling her she helped to change their attitudes toward women.

Sessum has also had good experiences with male bloggers. She said she sees blogging as another way for men and women to communicate through writing and conversing on the web. "Blogging has introduced me to wonderful people both men and women that I wouldn't have known any other way, and if nothing else comes of it, that is a beautiful thing."

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