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Eleven lessons learned about blogging, so far

10-12 minutes

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This post is to share lessons I have learned about blogging so far, five weeks into this blog.

First, it's hard to believe it's only been five weeks. "Internet time" lives, I can tell you that.

Second, I'd like to truly thank everyone who has read this blog, linked to this blog, sent this blog to your friends, or come up to me at various parties and events to say that you've been reading it -- and also the people who have emailed me and especially the people who posted comments before I turned comments off!

It's a lot of fun to interact directly with a community of people who share my interests and passions, and I plan to continue for a long time.

Third, I should have started doing this years and years ago.

Anyone who says blogs are not widely read is incorrect. I have been absolutely amazed at the range and diversity of the people who have been reading this blog, and so quickly.

It is crystal clear to me now that at least in industries where lots of people are online, *blogging is the single best way to communicate and interact*.

I [missed this early on](#), but I certainly get it now.

Fourth, one of the best things about blogs is how they enable a conversation among people with shared interests.

However, precisely how this conversation happens is not completely straightforward.

Most recently, I turned off comments on this blog because I was no longer willing to spend the time required to moderate for relevance and civility, and that has me thinking hard about the topic of Internet conversation.

Those of us who have been on the Internet for a long time recall the heyday of Usenet -- a world in which hundreds or thousands of conversations, most of them unmoderated, flourished among the lucky few who had Internet access prior to 1994. One of the clear negative consequences to the "great opening" of the Internet from 1994 on was the influx of spam and abuse that substantially damaged those discussions, and shut down many of them.

Blogging is clearly the second coming of high-quality Internet conversations, but it is also clear that comments on blogs run the same risk of being damaged by spam and abuse, and that new approaches to maintaining a high quality of discourse are required.

The first time I met [Dave Sifry](#), over three years ago, he told me that conversations on the Internet would eventually all revolve around every individual having a blog, each individual posting her own thoughts on her own blog, and blogs cross-linking through mechanisms like trackbacks and blog search engines (such as Dave's [Technorati](#)).

The advantage of this new world, said Dave, is that each individual (anonymous or not) would be publicly responsible for their own content and in charge of their own space -- substantially reducing the risk of spam and trolls -- and the communication would flow through the links. There would still be the risk of link spam, but at least this new world would make people more responsible for their own content, and that would tend to uplevel the discourse.

I think Dave is exactly right, and the implications of this new world are very interesting.

I am currently supporting trackbacks on my most recent 20 posts. I am also reading both [Technorati](#) and [Google Blog Search](#) results for my blog, multiple times per day. In addition, I am maintaining a public email address (pmarcablog AT gmail DOT com), for which I am reading all incoming messages, although not responding to most of them (which I warn about on my home page). I'm also watching the various news aggregation services such as [Techmeme](#), [Y Combinator News](#), [Digg](#), and [Reddit](#), which occasionally link to my posts.

This combination of approaches makes it easy for me to track what other people are saying about the things I write, and I am trying to follow up as often as possible by either commenting on their blogs (if they have comments turned on) or at least thinking about what they say.

Over the next few months I will be experimenting with other approaches to encouraging a flow of conversation in and out of my blog. Suggestions on this topic are very welcome -- please send them to pmarcablog AT gmail DOT com.

I would also love to add a real-time component to my blog -- e.g. a Flash-based chat room or shoutbox of some kind where people who are on my blog at the same time (including me) can interact. My friends at [Meebo](#) are close to providing this with their new Rooms service but it's not quite there yet. I hope to figure out a good approach soon.

Fifth, writing a blog is *way* easier than writing a magazine article, a published paper, or a book -- but provides many of the same benefits.

I think it's an application of the 80/20 rule -- for 20% of the effort (writing a blog post but not editing and refining it the quality level required of a magazine article, a published paper, or a book), you get 80% of the benefit (your thoughts are made available to interested people very broadly).

Arguably blogging is better because the distribution of a blog can be even broader than a magazine article, a published paper, or a book, at least in cases where the article/paper/book is restricted by a publisher to a limited readership base.

This of course assumes that you're not trying to make a living writing magazine articles or books, or you're not trying to get tenure as a professor by publishing peer-reviewed research papers.

However, at least in the former case, even the money part is changing fast. There are now a meaningful number of bloggers making a reasonable, even great, living by blogging, in some cases substantially more money than they would writing for a magazine or a book publisher.

It is going to be tremendous fun to see the race that is rapidly evolving between blogging on the one hand and traditional forms of publishing on the other hand -- there are advantages on all sides, but I think blogging is going to pose a lot more challenges to magazines, newspapers, books, and other forms of traditional written media in the years to come, and more so than many people in those industries currently imagine.

It's also been striking to me how much more fun blogging is versus public speaking -- at least for me. And the reach from blogging seems to be much broader than speaking even at the largest conferences. I'm not sure I'll ever speak in public again -- I'll be at home instead, blogging in my underwear.

Sixth, blogging tolerates and even encourages stylistic idiosyncracies that traditional publishing would not accommodate.

Incremental thinking is OK.

Interactive feedback with readers is possible, even easy.

Revisions in the face of new information are OK -- personally, I think it's a great idea to go back and revise blog posts based on new information.

Your weird writing style and flowery language is not necessarily held against you.

And of course it's much easier to link to other information or other people in blogs than it is in books or magazine articles.

Seventh, it is totally clear that original content is what generates readership, at least for most bloggers.

Some bloggers who blog a lot and link to a ton of interesting things every day have high levels of readership without a lot of original content, but I'd argue they are in the minority -- most of the bloggers

I've talked to over the last year who have significant levels of traffic attribute their readership mostly to original content, and this is certainly true for my blog.

I can see this in my blogging statistics -- a piece of original content that goes viral generates *way* more page views than a piece of content that does not.

Although my home page readership and my RSS and email subscription numbers are all growing, so we'll see where it all ends up.

Eighth, I am convinced there is a whole world of optimization to be done based on detailed stats and studying what works and what doesn't on one's blog. I'm just getting into that now -- using advanced stats from [Feedburner](#) and [Sitemeter](#) -- and will be writing more about this in the future.

Ninth, we are definitely entering a world in which bloggers are taken super-seriously by political candidates, company PR departments, government officials, and book editors, among many others. That trend is just starting -- but people who have spent their careers dealing with professional press now definitely "get it" that what happens on blogs matters just as much, or more.

Tenth, it's been fun to see the traffic to my blog generated by services such as Digg, Reddit, Techmeme, and the like, but the big surprise to me has been the amount of traffic that I get from [StumbleUpon](#).

It's not that uncommon to have days in which StumbleUpon to be my single largest source of incoming traffic.

Perhaps I'm just surprised because I don't know that many people who use it, but I think EBay did a very smart thing buying them, and I hope they keep it going. If not, there are going to be more startup opportunities around that idea.

Eleventh and last, the most common reaction that I got from starting my blog that I *didn't* expect was, "*finally* he's blogging".

I found that to be quite humorous because of course from the perspective of bloggers who have been active for several years, it's completely true, and yet here we are still living in a world where most people who have interesting things to say are not yet blogging and have no idea that they're behind the trend curve.

(I also found it to be humorous because if you want to get technical about it, I started my [first blog](#) in 1993.)

We have an exciting five or ten years ahead of us during which many people who today are not blogging will be quote-unquote *finally* starting. Let's see if we can make them feel welcome when they arrive :-).