I recently discovered a corner of the internet that was new to me. It felt like stepping into a slightly glitchy simulation of the world of “mommy blogs,” circa 2010. There were uncomplicated, inexpensive recipes, low-key home organization guides, amateur photography — even stock photographs, the presence of which is always a sign you’re in a part of the internet where there’s probably more going on than meets the eye. The posts were remarkably ordinary, so boring that some could have been written by bots, but the very light sprinkling of personal details about the authors assured me they weren’t. “Pregnancy is a huge part of any woman’s life,” reads the beginning of one post about early pregnancy symptoms on Journey to SAHM (SAHM stands for stay-at-home mom). That statement seems arguable, as well as the suggestion that cramping or bloating would be “Weird and Shocking” to anyone with a menstrual cycle. And I’m not interested in ever being pregnant again. It was obvious 50 words into this post that it contained nothing new or helpful to me or anyone else. Yet I found myself clicking through, maybe out of a sense of incredulousness that content like this is still being produced in earnest in 2019. Some of these blog posts read like an Amy Sedaris script, like this incredibly detailed set of instructions on how to set up a “coffee station” that I bookmarked and am compelled to reread on a weekly basis (“Now there are all kinds of goodies you could stock your coffee station with,” blogger Margo of Joyful Homemaking writes, “but of course, first and foremost is a coffee maker”). When I browse these blogs, I feel lulled into a state of comfortable voyeurism, which is not how I feel when consuming content written by the gleaming-haired momfluencers I follow on Instagram. I couldn’t have hate-read these blogs if I’d tried to. “Just this last year,” Margo writes in a post about dealing with fatigue, “my hubby and I have started going to bed a lot earlier. When our kids were little, we got into the habit of staying up late, so we could have some time after they went to bed, to do what we wanted. Now though, we’ve started going to bed shortly after the kids do, and giving up most of our TV time. There’s really not much worth watching anyway.” That last line brought me an unexpected jolt of delight. There is something transgressively bland about this vein of blogs that I’d hit. Unlike most media that targets women, these bloggers are not compelled to breathlessly enthuse about every emergent pop-cultural phenomenon. Is everyone as excited as I am for the new season of Stranger Things?!... Were you as obsessed as we were with Maya Rudolph’s caftan at the Oscars last night?!!!...We NEED to know: What lipstick is AOC wearing?! Women influencers are expected to maintain an unrealistic level of enthusiasm for almost everything, and these bloggers seemed notably immune to that one particular rigor of online femininity. Internet subcultures are hard to define spatially, and I haven’t found the edge of this one yet. These homemaking blogs exist in a hard-to-differentiate sprawl. Many of them share almost identical design themes. Once you start going deep, it can feel like a hall of mirrors, stretching on forever, each site very similar to the last, yet ever so slightly distinct. Whenever I think I have a handle on the big names in this game (Sarah Titus, What Mommy Does, Just a Girl and Her Blog, TwinsMommy, and What Moms Love are among the higher-traffic sites), I’ll stumble upon a new, almost identical blog that seems to be just as popular. It’s hard to parse how you’d choose to become a fan of one over another. More than once I had the sensation that I was reading in a second language, as though there must be layers of meaning that I wasn’t able to pick up on. And yet I’m a native English speaker, a student of digital culture. The “about” pages of these blogs almost always feature unretouched photos of women who look like anyone you might see at the grocery store. They are almost always stay-at-home moms, and they sometimes identify their children by name, but not often. God usually gets name-checked. The more popular sites seem to host about 100,000–200,000 pageviews per month, which is a tiny fraction of the traffic received by Instafamous momfluencers like Love Taza, Cupcakes and Cashmere, and LaTonya Yvette, all of which have monthly pageviews well into the millions. These women are not, as far as I can tell, trying to build brands around their personalities. Which compels a seasoned internet traveler to ask: What are they doing? What’s really going on in this strange, aggressively boring corner of the internet? Most lifestyle blogs today — and many larger websites that publish shopping content or product reviews, including BuzzFeed — practice some form of affiliate marketing through links. For example, each time someone clicks through to Nordstrom’s website to see which tiny gold earrings the women at Cup of Jo are “all in love with,” and then buys those earrings, Cup of Jo earns a small commission. And many bloggers make money more directly from selling printables (files you can download, either for free or for a fee, and then print out at home as many times as you like), recipe collections, lifestyle guides, and other downloadable extensions of their brand. As I clicked around these mysteriously bland mommy blogs, it gradually started to become clear: The reason for their existence is affiliate marketing and e-commerce. What’s different about this specific blog ecosystem is that the product many of the bloggers are selling is guides to setting up your own affiliate-linked blog or Shopify site, where you can sell your printables. The content of those printables and blog posts themselves seems secondary — their primary purpose is to give the blog a reason to exist. Affiliate links often take you to recommended products on Amazon, like craft supplies or housewares (or in the case of the Journey to SAHM post on pregnancy symptoms, Citrucel and an ovulation test kit), but more often they link to online courses on blogging. “Want to learn how to start a blog from home, mama?” asks a post on TwinsMommy.com that has been shared 46,000 times. Most of these blogs feature a post exactly like this one: a friendly, first-person invitation to try something new. The tone is reminiscent of a late-night infomercial, acknowledging a shared difficulty alongside the promise of a secret to overcoming it. “I’m sure you read a lot of mom blogs, go on Facebook, and hang out on Pinterest when your little one is sleeping,” continues the TwinsMommy post. “You see everyone online with their blog, and you’re wondering, how do I start a blog? You want to join this awesome community. I can’t blame you. I’ve been blogging for two years on this blog and let me tell you, starting a mom blog was the best decision I ever made.” Suddenly the oddly haphazard nature of the posts I was seeing made sense. These aren’t blogs primarily meant for telling a story, or establishing someone’s digital personality — they’re blogs for earning money. And among the most popular items for sale, it would seem, are guides for how to make money through blogging. They are blogs about blogging. The substance of the blogs — guidance on motherhood and domesticity — is often so thinly reconstituted that it’s basically motherhood tips from a content farm. Rather than writing about their own personal experiences or expertise, the mothers producing it seem to be following a set of conventions that they learn in the online blogging courses they buy. The result is a uniformity of tone and content that fails to conjure anything real. It’s a simulation of motherhood engineered to earn a bit of income for mothers. Many of these blogs publish “income reports” where the bloggers itemize how much their blog earned them each month, and discuss their best-selling items, their challenges, and their sales goals. These reports — which are common among more established lifestyle bloggers as well — appear to exist as a nod toward transparency, but in this case they also act as a kind of sales pitch to convince readers that a blogger’s advice is worth paying for. Their accuracy is unverifiable, and appears to be completely up to the bloggers’ discretion. Elna Cain is the blogger behind TwinsMommy and several other blogs, all of which she told me are “profitable.” Cain is in her thirties and lives in Ontario, Canada, and has been blogging since 2014, when her maternity leave ended and she realized she didn’t want to return to her job of working as a teacher’s aide and autism specialist. Cain wouldn’t disclose her income, but told me it’s “much more than I could make at any job.” Her main sources of income are the blogging courses she has developed herself, which she sells for around $90 each. The courses are designed for bloggers who are just starting out and want to grow their audience and improve their moneymaking capabilities. Although anyone could apply Cain’s courses to their blogs, she acknowledged that her clientele is mainly aspiring mommy bloggers — members of this existing ecosystem. If you look at it from the right angle, this type of blogging begins to resemble a cousin of multilevel marketing (MLM). Multilevel marketing typically involves a pyramidlike structure wherein very successful salespeople recruit other salespeople, who in turn are encouraged to recruit others. More established salespeople earn a commission from the sales made by their recruits, hence the “multilevel” dimension. The high earners at the top of the pile serve as motivation to newbies, and a big part of what they sell isn’t a physical product at all, but the promise of independent wealth and success, whether it comes from selling yoga leggings or teaching yoga classes. The idea is that “If I can do it, so can you.” The financial model in this case is inverted, in a sense; successful bloggers at the top of the figurative pyramid can earn income through newer bloggers sharing links to their products (printables or “blogging tools” and guides), while those less established bloggers earn a small affiliate commission. Bloggers often invest a significant amount of money on these tools to get them started, but there’s no guarantee that your upfront investment will pay off; after all, the internet is filled with stories of women who have gone into perilous debt while trying to earn money as LuLaRoe leggings salespeople. And the overlap with MLM is multilayered; many bloggers sell printables with instructions for making your own essential oil blends, which is another branch of the giant MLM tree in American economic life. “Ahh your so good at this blogging thing!” one commenter wrote under a 2017 TwinsMommy post about the blog’s financial growth. “I have been at it for 4 years and still not monetised — you need to teach me your ways.” I asked Cain if she felt that some would-be mommy bloggers risked wasting their money on courses. “Anyone can make courses nowadays, right?” she said. “I find that you need to know the blogger behind the course, know their journey.” Cain admitted that many people spend money on blogging courses and then lose momentum and never use them. “I hear stories on Facebook from people who have spent hundreds of dollars on these courses. It’s a big investment.” But from her point of view, the issue is not with the material they’ve paid for. “A lot of people who have bought my courses don’t go into the course. A lot of people buy, and they have that quick idea that this could work, but they lose motivation.” I suspect you could trace much of the popularity of both MLMs and this style of blogging among American women back to a common cause. The stresses of contemporary life have made it increasingly difficult for anyone to embody the archetype of the tender, order-giving mother. Printables and this ecosystem of blogging, not to mention all the momfluencers working hard on Instagram and elsewhere, are capitalizing on the tantalizing offer of this still very powerful cultural role, which is theoretically available to anyone, regardless of privilege. Motherhood as a social construct is becoming increasingly entrepreneurial, as social safety nets fray and being a stay-at-home nurturer — or even a nurturer with a full-time-job — becomes increasingly unfeasible for many women. The US government guarantees virtually no paid maternity leave, and no accessible, affordable daycare. Young families are on their own. So the painful underbelly of the exalted momtrepreneurial side hustle is the fact that for many women, the side hustle is keeping the lights on. And the central question for the entrepreneurial yet ordinary mother is: what to sell? Wealthy or stylish moms can sell ads and products by trading on their appearance and their aspirational — or perfectly imperfect — lifestyle, but what does an ordinary, unglamorous woman have that the public will want to buy? In barren, late-capitalist terrain, selling the ability to blog, even if that blog itself will be about little more than the act of blogging, seems to be a viable commodity. For the first decade of the history of blogs (which most people agree started around 1994), most blogs were unpaid creative outlets for people with day jobs who wanted a place to post their writing. They were (and are!) cheap and fast to set up, requiring very little expertise. Blogging was first and foremost a tool for people who needed to write and didn’t want to wait for some publication’s permission. In that way, blogs were a tool of personal liberation. They allowed great writers to be discovered, and then to get paid for their work by getting published by larger outlets, or by running ads on their sites as their audiences grew. Eventually, marketing evolved to reward the most popular bloggers with sponsorships, and social media (especially Instagram) created an efficient, consistent platform for those sponsorship deals, and thus we have influencers. The curious thing about the affiliate marketing and Shopify mommy blogs is that their history moves in the opposite direction: These bloggers — who generally don’t have other jobs — start their blogs initially hoping for a source of extra income, and then teach themselves to write posts and draw in readers as a way to reach their sales goals. Hena Bilal, who runs MendingWithGold.com, is a 34-year-old stay-at-home mother of two based in Pakistan and has been blogging for two years. Her husband serves in the Pakistani military, and she was a schoolteacher before deciding to stay at home with her first child. But her blog reads as though it’s addressing an American audience, and she told me that most of her traffic comes from the US. Bilal first heard about the promise of affiliate marketing blogging on Pinterest. “I started blogging in order to be able to stay home with my son but also without having any financial worries,” she wrote to me. “I would read everywhere that blogging provided just that!” Bilal wrote on her blog that she invested over $2,500 on blogging when she was starting out. After two years, Bilal told me she currently makes about $200 a month blogging, but she hopes to someday reach her goal of $5,000 a month, at which point she plans to take her family on a religious pilgrimage, as well as “sponsor” 20 kids whose parents don’t have the means to support them. (On her blog, Bilal writes, “I don’t know where the 20 came from, but since my class made fun of this number, I decided to stick to it!”) Bilal seems committed to blogging for profit, despite being far from reaching her earnings goals; by my calculation, she’s only just breaking even now, given what she initially invested. “I know have a long way to go. A blog biz is NOT for everyone,” she wrote me. “It’s NOOOOT easy money at all. But IT IS real! I confirm this.” And I find myself rooting for her. Unlike some of these blogs about blogging, Mending With Gold contains flashes of personality amid the fairly predictable advice about surviving motherhood. In a post about how to carve out moments for self-care during the day, Bilal writes, “Go to an empty room and just enjoy the alone time in there. Let everyone wreak havoc outside. They’re doing that all the time anyway.” The odd moments when these writers let their guards down — which is something that Instafamous momfluencers almost never allow themselves to do — are ultimately what make these blogs fascinating to me. A distinct written voice is also what first drew me to Sarah Titus’s blog, which was my entry point into this ecosystem. Titus is an exemplar of Shopify guru-hood, with a very compelling rags-to-riches origin story and a strident but disarming candor that sets her apart from her more Stepford-sounding counterparts. “Six years ago,” she writes in the “My Story” section of her blog, “I was living in a homeless shelter and had $30k worth of debt. My ex-husband was on his 3rd affair and my kids and I had nothing except what I could pack in a small car. The shelter was dirty, people were always sick, the food was so old I wouldn’t serve it to a starving dog, and there were no windows.” She ended up divorcing her adulterous husband, only to be ordered by a judge to get a job to support her kids. “I BELIEVE THAT MOST WOMEN CAN QUIT WORKING AND STAY HOME WITH THEIR KIDS IF THAT’S WHAT THEY WANT TO DO,” she declares in her story. “Does it take sacrifice, yes, hard work, yes, but you CAN get there and I’m committed to showing you how!!!” Titus’s narrative involves extreme frugality on her part, a cast of unsupportive characters who don’t understand her commitment to staying home with her kids, and after some twists and turns, she starts a blog. The dissonance between the pink-and-white sterility of her website and the roiling defensiveness of her tone can be a little jarring, but ultimately, she grabs your attention. “When I first started blogging, I used the blog as more of a journal to get out my feelings,” Titus told me. “The audience that I attracted connected to my story. A lot of people say, don’t do a journal-style blog now, but as humans we all want to connect. We all crave to be loved on. Yes, teach something too, but we need to show empathy. Like in pictures on Pinterest, people crop off the heads of people, but I like to keep the heads of people on there, because the picture should relate to people.” Titus’s more confessional style echoes the early mommy blogs of a decade ago, and I asked her if she felt that her success was due to her candor. “Your story sells,” she said. “It always sells. I was coaching [another blogger], and they were more professional, clinical, and I started teaching them — ‘Okay, share more of your personality. Share more of your story.’ And they started interjecting their own heart into it, and now they’re doing a lot better.” Today, Titus is one of the so-called six-figure bloggers — bloggers who clear six figures annually in Shopify sales or affiliate-link revenue. She has a P.O. box in Pennsylvania, but declined to share where in the US she lives; she’s very protective of her privacy. Her income comes from a dizzying array of printables that she designs herself, courses that she creates on how to run a Shopify business, and affiliate sellers who sell her courses on their websites. Affiliates earn a small cut of their sales of her products, but she pockets the majority. Titus offers many single-sheet printables as freebies on her site; her more lucrative printables come in large themed packs of documents called binders. She sells Christmas and Easter binders, medical binders, essential oil recipe binders, binders to help organize your housecleaning; most of these cost $67. Her most expensive binder, the Shopify binder (which helps you keep your Shopify business organized) sells for almost $300; she advertises it with the claim that she earned more than $52,000 through Shopify sales in her first month using the tool. Titus told me — and it seems true — that she is essentially alone at the top of the heap in this niche. “I found a hole in the blogging industry where no one else was. No one else was creating binders at that time. So I wanted to be that binder queen,” she said. “That’s how I made my way into this niche where there was no one else. I don't have any competition.” In an email, Titus told me that she earned $2.8 million in revenue through her Shopify sales of printables last year. This figure strains credulity, but I am not in a position to directly dispute it. And no matter what the exact numbers are, she has a good reputation in the mommy blogging–for-profit community. “I do trust her,” Bilal told me in an email. “If you’re on her email list, or in blogging communities where she hangs out, you’ll see she gives more than she gets. Sometimes you doubt why she’s giving away everything. … People WANT to pay her even for her freebies.” And that, in a way, is the larger mystery to me. Anyone who reads these blogs has access to a computer with basic graphic design tools, so what makes these printables so appealing? I probably would have clicked out of this blog ecosystem without giving it much thought if it hadn’t been for the zany presence of all these printables. The concept has been trendy on Pinterest and Etsy for several years, and the variety of printables being given and sold on these stay-at-home mom blogs is dizzying: There are templates for grocery lists and weekly meal plans, daily and monthly calendar printouts, monthly workout plans, templates for keeping track of medication, packing lists for a family trip to Disney, Bible study plans, charts to keep track of how much water you’re drinking, and daily gratitude prompts that you can color in yourself, internalizing your gratitude while you color. There is also a huge wall art subgenre, featuring graphics you can personalize with a name or initials, or positive affirmations like “Rest and Recharge,” or seasonal exhortations like “Let It Snow!” Most wall art printables remind me of decorative features you might find in the knickknack-filled dining room of a rural bed-and-breakfast: homey, unpretentious, but maybe a little bit overbearing. At first, I struggled to believe that people were spending money for very simply designed templates for grocery lists. Once printed out, wouldn’t these lists just clutter up your kitchen? In a world that increasingly demands that content be free, it made no sense to me that people were willing to pay money for amateur graphic design adorning boxes marked with the days of the week. Can’t people make their own lists, with a pen and paper? Are the templates really that appealing? Apparently, they are. Bilal told me she hadn’t planned to sell printables on her blog, but she observed how popular they were among successful bloggers like Titus, Ruth of LivingWellSpendingLess.com, and Laura at IHeartPlanners, and decided to try selling them herself. “I keep hearing ... from bloggers who have been doing this for more than a decade, that the demand for printables, for some reason, has never diminished,” Bilal wrote me. “Even after everything print publishing has undergone in the last 20 years with the rise of the digital world.” Both Bilal and Titus remarked that people just like to write things down by hand, and that for many people, printables are more intuitive and useful than maintaining digital lists. Linda Tieu, an American who has lived in Tuscany for the past several years, is a graphic designer who runs her own printables shop on Etsy and is an avowed fan of the phenomenon. “I moved to Italy when I got married, and I didn’t have as much access to things that I used to have access to,” Tieu said. “You know, like going to Target. Printables meant I could access anything related to scrapbooking, card-making, paper arts — and print it myself.” Tieu isn’t a blogger, but she explained to me that printables are a useful marketing tool for bloggers who are trying to increase their audience’s engagement. “In any kind of online business, the thing [experts] are always saying is, give something to someone so you can get their email! Something useful for your audience! Printables can be something to attract people.” (Most of these blogs invite readers to subscribe to their newsletters, per the advice of many blogging guides, which recommend getting readers’ email addresses to maintain engagement over time.) I can’t say I didn’t begin to understand the appeal of printables, the more time I spent in their environment. The idea of a “Wi-Fi printable” seems sensible; why don’t people put their Wi-Fi information where people can easily see it? I can imagine using weekly meal-planning printables, if only as a means to remind me that meal planning saves my husband and I from having a daily text exchange at 3 p.m. about what we’re going to have for dinner. Would my kids be pleased if I framed personalized printables of their names and hung them on their bedroom walls? Probably! How you organize your home is, like everything else, a class issue. Not everyone can afford hundred-dollar sets of clear plastic canisters for their kitchens, and many can’t relate to the interiors featured in Apartment Therapy. For a significant population of North American women, domestic organization has a look and feel that is quite distinct from the sun-drenched, white-tiled restraint that has come to define upscale media representations of successful tidiness. The look is more like an enthusiastically decorated elementary school classroom. And it owes a lot to 8.5 x 11 printer paper. The triumph of being able to spend time with one’s kids while earning money from home forms the backbone of this blogging subculture’s raison d’être. It’s what animates many of the people — especially women — who sell products through MLMs too. And I’m not interested in criticizing the bloggers trying to make money from affiliate links or by shilling guides to setting up a Shopify shop. Multilevel marketing always operates on the exploitation of the world’s only truly renewable resource: the hopes and aspirations of everyday people. And it’s the structure of that marketing system, not the women who get caught up trying to game it, that deserves criticism. Ultimately, bundling a bunch of SEO and content marketing best practice advice and selling it to aspiring mommy bloggers is just another dot on the radar screen of capitalist exploitation. After all, lots of wealthy, conventionally attractive, or otherwise magnetic women become influencers and instrumentalize their roles as nurturers for money. Some influencers are naturally gifted storytellers, but a lot of them are awful writers. So if natural creative talent isn’t a prerequisite for making money off the internet, why shouldn’t women who don’t necessarily fit the influencer mold have their kick at the can too? Blogging by mothers, about being mothers, has never been taken seriously; the term “mommy blog” says it all, really. As Natalie Jean Lovin (who was one of the big names in Mormon mommy blogging through the mid-aughts, before getting out of the game) said in an article last year in the Cut, “there would be a Pulitzer Prize for blogging, if men did it more.” Yet the digital economy continues to colonize new products and services, and mothers are hugely influential producers and consumers of media. It’s hardly scandalizing that capitalism has pivoted to moms, and that moms have engaged with its opportunities and costs to the extent that they’re blogging purely for profit (or in hope of it), rather than for catharsis or as a public service. What is more interesting to me about this shadow-realm of mommy blogs that simulate other, more successful blogs in the hopes of earning money is the way it feels a bit like peering around a bend into a future paradigm of online life. Though it might be tempting to characterize this niche economy in dystopian terms, I think it’s better described as marginal. These blogs read like assemblages of information and content scavenged from other parts of the internet, like a content favela mushrooming up around the gleaming cities where the high-paid influencers live. And I think the content these blogs produce — the sea of printables — are a sign of hope, more than anything else. To be able to exert control over your domain as a mother with flair, and love, and resourcefulness, is something that few people, regardless of income, have the time and resources to do. Sarah Titus understands this keenly. At the conclusion of her story of overcoming adversity and becoming a successful blogger, she appeals to her readers. “Do you feel like the bills and walls are closing in on you? Do you feel like you can’t seem to get your blog to make the income you know it CAN make? Do you feel stuck? Like you’ve lost hope and you’re spiraling? Maybe you feel like you should quit blogging,” she writes. “Don’t quit,” she continues. “You can do this! I’ve been there, and I’m excited to show you how I overcame it all! I’m excited you’re here. Let’s walk this journey together!” Capitalism does not reward nurturing; it is a job that is done for free. As the role of mother and nurturer becomes harder to play, given people’s time and financial constraints, we fetishize it ever more fiercely. And even though the ability to nurture can’t be bought, that won’t stop people from trying to evoke it, copy it, reconstitute it, and sell it, until there’s no more money left to spend.