

## **A Short History of Blogging 2000-2020** **Elizabeth Nolan, Brand Buzz New York.**

### **The Blog 1997 (?) - 2019**

The Blog, full name 'Weblog' died on Sunday, aged approximately 23 years old.

The cause of death was a long illness caused by complications in the relationship between the blog and the advertising industry.

The blog is survived by its Father, The Internet; younger brother 'Vlog' (video-blog) and sister 'Blove!' (blog-novel).<sup>1</sup>

### **The New Digital Democracy**

Whilst the exact date of birth of the blog is unknown, it is generally agreed that Jorn Berger's 'Robot Wisdom' Weblog launched in 1997 was the first modern blog.

Born of a utopian desire to bring down mass media, blog's subversive formative years were spent as far away from the arena of marketing as can be imagined; a highly personal electronic journal of sorts, representative solely of the voice of the individual.

The blog's early years read like David and Goliath in cyberspace, as the little man took on the system and won. Its first notable success was the 'Rathergate' scandal in the US in 2004. Bloggers revealed the now-defunct CBS, had used forged documents to cast doubt over George W Bush's military service in Vietnam in the run up to the 2004 presidential election. A red-faced CBS were forced to admit inadequate reporting practices.

It's almost impossible to imagine now but advertisers and clients alike were initially fearful of this powerful electronic grapevine. A word from the right genesis point and companies and products could disintegrate. One need only recall the 2004 Kryptonite bike lock fiasco, where bloggers revealed the supposedly indestructible lock could actually be picked with a Bic Pen. It cost the company \$258 million in legal costs.

With successes like these it came as no surprise that 2004 was officially recognized as the 'Year of the blog'.

---

<sup>1</sup> The 'Blove!', was born in August 2006 when former ad executive Neil French published the first blog-novel ironically entitled 'Death by Blog'. It went on to be downloaded in excess of 2 million times and instigated the foundation of The New York Times' 'Blove! Bestseller List.'

## Uneasy Bedfellows

It didn't take long for corporate trepidation to be eclipsed by a perception of great opportunity. From 2004 onwards, advertising agencies begin to experiment with the form in two distinct but parallel ways:

1. Blog as ad space – advertisers align brands with an existing blog.
2. The Faux Blog – agency-created blogs linked to specific brands/campaigns; either overt inventions or covert and propagated as authentic.

It was a tempestuous relationship that caused a huge rift in the blogging community. Bloggers who allowed advertisers to co-opt the hallowed blogosphere were viewed quite simply, as selling-out.

But corporate dollars soon eclipsed small voices. The blog boom had arrived and from 2004 to 2018 advertisers were rolling in clover. Blogs became an increasingly prevalent part of the marketing mix, harnessed for every key event in the advertising calendar. Even Hillary Clinton enlisted blog's help to secure two successive terms as US president.

It was glorious, but like the three Martini lunch all good things must come to an end. As one industry insider stated in the wake of Sunday's news:

“We were all equally guilty, decreasing traditional ad spend, lamenting the death of the 60 second spot and *telling* our clients to spend on blogs. It became a new and thoroughly legitimate part of the marketing mix– I can't think of a better way to target such narrow and defined demographics - but somewhere along the line we just lost our way.”

## Video Killed the Radio Star, Advertising Killed the Blog.

Whilst bloggers continued to protest the wallpapering of the blog space it was the more stealthlike rise of the faux blog which was sowing the seed for future trouble. The number of 'traditional' or personal blogs continued to grow exponentially from 2004 onwards, but outstripping it by almost 10 to 1 by 2013 was the rise of the 'faux blog'. Of the top 10 companies spending on advertising in the US and UK between 2010 and 2018 every single one of them cited blogging as part of the ad spend, all of these were faux blogs.

From 2012 onwards however, a number of landmark cases saw consumers publicly lift the lid on faux blogs posing as authentic. From the unmasking of the “LuxCar” blog as being covertly funded by Mercedes Benz, to this year's Pepsi debacle in which their much lauded Tony Hawk Jr “Pepsi and Me” blog was revealed to have as much to do with Tony Hawk Jr as Boca burgers have to do with cows.

There wasn't one fatal blow, rather a number of small hits year after year which finally beat the blog into the ground. The 'one clear voice' philosophy was forgotten. By the beginning of 2018 amidst the clamour of over-saturation and corporate humiliation, public distrust reigned supreme.

Blogging which had set out to *take on* mass media, had become its own nemesis.

As Professor Marcus Wright<sup>2</sup> stated, “In looking for, dare I say it, ‘grassroots’ tactics, the advertising industry ignored the foundations upon which blogging was built; the individual voice booming loud and clear through the corporate subterfuge.”

### **Back To The Future?**

But even as preparations were being made today to cryogenically freeze the blog’s remains, whispers were abound of a possible resurrection.

“In a way we have to turn the clock back. Go back to the blog circa 2006 and knowing what we know now stop it from happening again. There is nothing to say that bloggers and advertisers cannot co-exist successfully, but if we are going to resurrect blog, we have to do it in the spirit from which it was conceived. Authenticity.

Advertisers should look to blogs to organically grow trends by leveraging the role of bloggers as peer influencers, not simply ‘co-opt cool’ by indiscriminately buying up blog space or cashing in on a perceived authenticity which they then undermine. It’s an opportunity to target consumers in a more pinpointed and specific manner, but it must be approached with caution and used only where it is most appropriate. it cannot be a case of everybody else is doing it, why aren’t we. If only we’d known 15 years ago what we know now.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps then the correct sentiment is not RIP, but rather the blog is dead, long live the blog.

---

<sup>2</sup> Head of Blog Sciences PHD program at Wharton Business School.

<sup>3</sup> Amelia Robinson-Hyde, Editor. Blog e-zine.