"A Good Blog Is A Continuing Conversation." How I Learned To Blog And Use Social Media As a Feminist Activist

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This article is based on Ms. Heuwagen's thesis at the University of South Florida

Abstract: Blogging has become a hot ticket to fast and lasting notoriety. Or has it? With what seems like everyone starting a blog, it is easy to get pulled into the idea that once you start writing you can become successful in a matter of just a few posts. As a feminist activist, I set out to discover what it takes to become a successful blogger with a social media presence. I spent several months writing and working with Matter of Cause, an organization looking to create change online. My narrative reflects the triumphs and difficulties of online feminist activism. As I worked on writing blog posts that reflected my views on pop culture, feminism, and sex positivity, I faced the hard work and determination it takes to establish a successful online feminist brand through social media.

How It All Began

Hi Samantha," the email began, "[a friend of mine] passed me your name and email. I run the blog for I Am Choice Community Changemakers.[1] We would love to invite you to write for our blog, 'I am Choice.' I know you have an active blog yourself, so we're also interested in sharing reposts.

I was stunned. How on Earth did this editor find me, and why was she interested in my writing? I had been running my own blog, *A Feminist Life*, for almost four years and though the blog had grown with me, I never received any substantial interest in it before. I realized quickly that this opportunity would be a way to showcase my own work and allow me to grow as a writer. I responded to the editor, telling her that I would be more than happy to write for her website turned blog. I was so excited that I immediately began drafting a piece about heteronormativity and how the stereotypes of marriage and family feel as though they are constantly shoved down the throats of young people everywhere.[2] The editor of "I am Choice" accepted the piece and, thus, began a working relationship between me and the "I am Choice" team.

I submitted several pieces to the "I am Choice" organization before inquiring about an internship. I was approaching graduation, and I needed to complete an internship in order to graduate with my master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies. I contacted the president and founder of "I am Choice" about the newly established internship program. I was invited to meet with her in person. The interview process covered my views on politics, women's issues, and LGBTQ rights. I positioned myself as a pro-sex radical feminist activist who often commented on sex, politics, and pop culture. I got the job because of my teaching and volunteering on comprehensive sex education. The president hired me following a second interview and explained that I would be writing about women's issues and sex positivity. Twice a month I would write pieces of my own choosing.

I hoped writing for the blog would teach me to use social media as an activist and to operate a website successfully. I was interested in learning how to publicize my work more effectively and at the same time how I could enhance my activism through online technologies. This opportunity with the newly named, *Matter of Cause* (MOC) would be a way to merge my passion for writing and my interest in technology-based activism. This narrative of my time with MOC reflects the triumphs and difficulties of online feminist activism. I write as a white heterosexual 20-something middle class U.S. bilingual woman with an invisible disability. As I worked on writing blog posts that reflected my views on pop culture, feminism, and sex positivity, I discovered the work and determination it takes to establish a successful blog and social media presence that works towards creating a place for feminist activism online.

"It's A Matter Of Cause"

Matter of Cause (MOC) was originally named "I Am Choice: Community Changemakers." The mission of "I Am Choice" was to "spark, re-imagine, and cultivate community driven solutions for the issues people face" (MATTEROFCAUSE, 2013). The primary focus of the group was to organize opposition against the 2012 Florida Constitutional Amendment Six, dubbed "The Florida Abortion Amendment." This amendment would have prohibited the use of public funds for abortions. Fortunately, because of the efforts of "I Am Choice" and other organizations, the amendment was defeated (Ballotpedia 2012).

After the 2012 election the organization's future looked promising. During the 2013 Florida legislative session, the organization's leadership led a three-day awareness campaign, "Stop Hate, Stop 58," in response to Florida Senate Bill 58, nicknamed the "anti-religious hate" bill by advocacy groups.[3] The organization became so successful that within hours the "I am Choice" Facebook page had reached over 10,000 people and received national news coverage. In the end, the bill did not pass in the Florida Senate.

After its success, the organization's name became a problem. The word "choice" is controversial because it has become synonymous with abortion rights. Numbers of supporters and organizations became confused and believed "I Am Choice" only

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[1] I am Choice" organization slogan is now "Matter of Cause" and the website has also been changed to, www.matterofcause.com
[2] "Young People and the Pressure to Lead Lives of the Past"

[3] For more information about the Senate Bill 58, visit: http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2013/0058

focused on issues of access to safe abortions and reproductive rights, which was not the case. Though the organization was gaining traction in the political world, it was not reaching the audience it cared to target. "I am Choice" wanted to connect with other progressive organizations within the Tampa Bay area by focusing on the impacts of national and local stories. Ultimately, "I am Choice" leadership decided a new direction and name change were needed. After some debate and careful consideration of word usage, a new name was found: Matter of Cause (MOC). The slogan became, "It's a Matter of Cause." Currently, the main focus is to grow the readership and reach of MOC's articles. MOC leadership wants to build a platform to unite diverse but likeminded individuals in the Tampa Bay area for the ultimate purpose of galvanizing a political force.

MOC is more than a blog; it's an organization that "brings knowledge to action" through progressive voices. Key for MOC is to bring many voices to its progressive political agenda. MOC wants to be the No. 1 place to go for a fresh perspective as well as a device to document the progressive movement from a grassroots point of view. The goal is to bring real-life accounts to topics important to the people of Tampa Bay. MOC also works to bring issues of equality to the ballot by moving these issues hard enough for other organizations around the Tampa Bay area to join MOC in support. Ultimately, then, through MOC leadership, these issues reach the Florida State Government.

MOC is growing and changing. MOC publishes articles based on what is happening in the news. Content relies on the writers and how their individual experiences shape their understanding of current events, though some weeks there have been themes to the pieces. For example, MOC emphasized women's history month. During the weeks leading up to March, MOC posted several articles that looked at women's issues. Some examples of the categories that writers can choose from include race, gender, and sexuality issues and rights. MOC's goal is to establish a dialogue between its bloggers and readers by covering topics important to MOC's readers. The idea is to let the voices and expertise of MOC's writers make connections with people.

Overview Of Internship Responsibilities

As this was my first experience as an intern, I wasn't sure what to expect. In graduate school, I improved my skill as a writer. In addition, I had written for MOC before starting my internship. So I felt confident about my style of writing and its ability to fit the blog's intended audience. I was, however, apprehensive about helping MOC maintain an editorial calendar and lobby for specific legislation. Throughout my time with MOC, once a week I was responsible for one article that covered a variety of topics, such as feminism, women's issues, life, and sex. Despite some nervousness about non-writing assignments beyond my experience, I remained excited for the new opportunities this position would bring me.

Below is a brief overview of some of the responsibilities for which I was accountable during my time with MOC. The following is excerpted from my internship contract:

Intern Responsibilities
a. General Responsibilities
i. Maintain confidentiality: Intern will come in contact with various information, processes, methods, and supporter information. None of this or any other proprietary information should be disclosed without written permission from company.
ii. Work on days and times scheduled, as well as notify supervisor about any schedule changes.
iii. Act in accordance with all guidelines and dress requirements as specified.
iv. Complete all assignments, tasks, and projects within the deadlines and guidelines provided.
v. Communicate and collaborate with other team members in developing and executing daily tasks, projects, and/or campaigns.
vi. Provide feedback on internship during and upon completion.

b. Position Responsibilities
i. Researching and drafting statements as needed.
ii. Drafting, repacking, and editing content for blog.
iii. Collaborate with team members on new ideas, strategies, and messaging for campaigns and overall direction of blog.
iv. Oversee blog recruitment.

v.   Maintain editorial calendar.
vi.   Assist in expansion of online community and distribution of content.
vii. Attend weekly meetings and post weekly updates in Facebook work group.
viii. Maintain some general knowledge about current affairs as it pertains to women's issues (especially sexual assault on college/university campuses and reproductive rights in Florida).

I also was responsible for brainstorming ways to increase MOC's following. I read, watched, and listened to a lot of news sources because anything could be a story. Then I was to share and "like" the various posts on MOC's Facebook page through my own Facebook page, as well as ask my friends to do the same. Furthermore, I shared the articles on my own blog and even went so far as to join Twitter to promote MOC's work because MOC targeted likeminded progressives across the social media universe.

In the second week of March, I ended my internship earlier than the April 25 end date on my contract. I respectfully declined to continue to write for the organization because of editorial differences and my desire to take my writing in a different direction. During my brief writing career with MOC, I published nine articles and wrote an additional seven, plus an eighth that I eventually published on my blog, *A Feminist Life*. (See appendices for the texts of these articles.) I am proud of this body of work. In my mind, I left the internship amicably. I believe in MOC's mission, and I wish it continued success.

Blogging, Cyberfeminism, And Social Media

During my internship, in addition to reading and writing about feminist issues in the news and on the political agendas of progressives, I also read what the scholars have to say about blogging, social media, and cyberfeminism. I was trying to get a handle on the relationship between my stance as a feminist and online communities such as the blogosphere and social media. I discovered that I can claim the label cyberfeminist. As a form of online activism, cyberfeminism influences my choices of topics to write about. Since my interests and expertise lie with comprehensive sex education, I also searched for some consensus on how to define "sex positivity" in an effort to write about it in an engaging way for MOC.

To begin at the beginning, the word blog comes from the saying "log your being" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz 43). Blogs are one of the fastest growing forms of social media and a useful tool to reach others (Cooke 646). James Baker and Susan Moore write, "Blogs, or online diaries, are websites containing an archived series of reverse chronological items of content posted by the author" (Baker & Moore 379). Blogging is sometimes viewed as a new grassroots form of journalism (Nardi et al. 41), which is why MOC chose to use this type of medium to gain readers as well as establish a platform to create political change. Blogs combine the immediacy of up-to-the-minute posts and latest features with a sense of the author's personality, passions, and, of course, point of view (Cooke 646; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz 42). Blogging also offers quick feedback and provides the ability to test an idea with very little risk (Doctorow 1; Briggs 46). Running a blog does not take much in terms of funding and can easily be published quickly and with very little effort (Doctorow 1; Briggs 46). Bloggers do not need to go through a publisher or spend funds on publicity. Posts can be published within a matter of minutes and most websites are free to run (Doctorow 1; Briggs 46). Cooke explains, "At the heart of blogging is the notion that the person is not a 'respondent' reacting to our stimulus, but rather a willing participant on a journey of discovery"(Cooke 646).

Because I do the majority of my activism online as a blogger to promote such feminist ideals, I consider myself a cyberfeminist. This form of feminism shaped my approach to my MOC work and the way I represented myself online through social media. Betsy Eudey writes:

Many suggest that "cyberactivism" is an appropriate term for feminist civic engagement online, but that "cyberfeminism" should be reserved for those forms of activism that not only utilize the Internet, but also include critical reflection of the ways in which sexism and other oppressions are components of the online experience. (Eudey 241)

Technology has had a large impact on what we do as feminist activists by providing the mechanism wherein many individuals can gather to connect in real and

asynchronous time across geographic and socio-cultural distances in order to express their beliefs for a wider audience than anyone could have imagined less than a generation ago. Cyberfeminism picks up on the use of such communication technology, especially social media, and uses it to bring awareness to more people than ever before (Volkart ; Eudey 241; Nuñez Puente 334; Gillis 4; Paasonen 336). Although not without its limits, electronic communication puts more people in touch with one another for sharing ideas and concerns.

I used cyberfeminism as a tool to enhance my activism by utilizing my social media outlets to connect with other likeminded individuals. So I began to focus on the topics I would blog about and how those topics would touch my readers. In the beginning of my time writing for MOC, I was assigned the task to define sex positivity. MOC was interested in creating a piece that could become a reference when MOC wanted to discuss topics relating to sex. Put simply, sex positivity is being positive about sex. The problem, however, arises because sex is a politically charged issue and different people define "being positive about sex" differently. Lack of consensus on what constitutes sex positivity causes difficulties, let alone debate, for and among scholars and activists alike (Williams, Prior, & Wegner 273; Ferguson, Philipson, Diamond, Quinby, Vance, & Snitow 106; McElroy 3). If scholars and activists cannot agree, then implementing social change becomes even more difficult (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz 273; Ferguson, Philipson, Diamond, Quinby, Vance, & Snitow 106; McElroy 3). McElroy illustrates the problem: "The bottom line is that every woman has the right to define what is degrading and liberating for herself" (McElroy 3). I argue that a sex positive approach encourages a wide range of sexual expression that accounts for various sexual and gender identities, orientations, behaviors, and presentations. Of course, this enlightened view of sex positivity requires access to health care services and depends on comprehensive sexual education (Williams, Prior, & Wegner 273).

A message like sex positivity can be difficult to bring to readers because of its varying and sometimes competing definitions. However, using social media to promote these types of messages is an excellent way to begin dialogue among scholars, activists, and individuals interested in the subject. Yet social media users have to create their own audience (Leach 1). Using social media to broadcast information is hard work that requires a savvy understanding of how to use such tools. Also understanding how to use publicity effectively can aid in building a brand (Tagholm 1). Although social media offers authors the opportunity to connect with readers, said readers will connect with the author on their own terms to return, join, or abandon the site (Leach 1; Breakenridge 141). The viral aspect of social media makes it the contemporary analog to old-fashioned word of mouth—the elusive goal of authors and activists. An online "brand" grows from finding people who connect with and support the message and to share with their own networks of people (Breakenridge 141). Unlike traditional mass media, social media are today the cheapest and easiest way to get publicity, even as you have to work at it consistently (Leach 1). Noorin Ladhani explains, "Social media will remain a critical component during major global events; when used to exercise free speech, share information online, and organize, they become a powerful tool for activists"(Ladhani 57).

Cyberfeminism via social and blogging methods could extend my activism to an online audience, increase my reach among readers, and help MOC reach its goals. The simplicity of the concepts is deceptive. It is hard work to grow a following—from finding the topical sweet spot to networking in 140 characters or less.

Sex Plus Benedict Cumberbatch Equals Readers

Originally, I was asked to write about content both relevant to my life and reflective of MOC's progressive viewpoints. I tried to produce material compatible with the organization yet also true to my own worldview. After all, I was writing about feminism and sex positivity, two topics that are important to me. In hindsight, I can share three major lessons I learned from my internship: the difficulty of defining sex positivity, the shock of working with an editor for the first time, and the challenges of developing a readership. I take these hard-learned lessons with me as I continue to develop my voice as a feminist writer.

My first experience with writing about sex came in the form of a piece critiquing the product Summer's

Eve Cleansing Wash[4] and a TV commercial associated with the product. Promoted as a vagina wash, this product moved me to inform my audience; vaginas are self regulating and don't require chemicals. My piece focused on proper washing techniques for the vulva and vagina (something lacking in the :30 second commercial). After my initial piece was published, I began to feel more comfortable writing openly about sexual issues. Soon MOC leadership contacted me about producing an article to describe what it meant to be sex positive so that the organization would have a piece that would reflect how MOC viewed sex positivity. It also would be a way to introduce myself to MOC readers and introduce them to my writing on topics about sex. I headed to the library for a literature review.

Using the research I gathered on the subject, I put together an article that I thought reflected both my understanding and MOC's. It turns out that my definition was just that, uniquely mine. The organization decided to step away from defining sex positivity and move on to other pressing topics. Later published on *A Feminist Life*, I shared my ideas about sex positivity as:

> …[A] moving target that many scholars and activists alike cannot agree on. But I like to think of it as being positive about sex. It's a mentality that embraces all positive aspects of sexuality and the various acts of sex. There is no slut shamming or bashing of any kind about what people do to pleasure themselves. Sex is openly discussed. It also addresses the various myths associated with some sexual acts as well as myths about the body. I believe that a good sexual education is a must and that it teaches people from a young age about all the aspects of sex. Fulfillment and pleasure are on the top of my list as issues that need to be discussed in sex ed classes. Health is also an important matter when being sex positive. Knowing not only how to name the correct body parts but also knowing how the reproductive systems work, as well as how to pleasure oneself, is the first step towards being

being sexually healthy. Lastly, I also believe that safety and consent is a big part of being able to control what happens to you before, during and after sex. Consent is extremely important and sets the tone for the rest of your sex life. Seeing sex as beautiful is a wonderful thing. (Heuwagen, "A Feminist Life.")

Even though I struck out with MOC on the subject of being sex positive, I did walk away with a solid understanding of the movement. I developed a definition that I will use in my future work as a feminist activist on behalf of sexual health and comprehensive sexual education.

Next, subordinating my editorial independence to an editor also became a learning experience. It was a challenge because I was not used to working under others' guidelines, and now I had to be aware of how my writing reflected on MOC and its leadership. Even though it was a challenge to learn to write in a style that was unfamiliar to me, working so closely with an editor proved to be an excellent way for me to establish my voice as a writer. Although sex was off the table, the opportunity to write about pop culture helped me to develop as a blogger. As a result, I produced a piece about male celebrities claiming the title of feminist. I started to write in a snarky, sassy, and comedic voice. One of my favorite pieces to write was about the top three male celebrities who have mentioned feminism:

> As the stardom of Benedict Cumberbatch has grown throughout the last year with his hit TV show, Sherlock and starring in movies like Star Trek: Into Darkness and 12 Years a Slave, how can I not include him in the list? He's literally everywhere! Shrines of him are everywhere on tumblr and Instagram. Hordes of young fans call themselves "Cumberbitches" or "Cumberbabes." I have to be honest about something. Do you promise not to laugh? OK… I am a Cumberperson. There I said it- it's out in the open, finally. For most of you, you've now decided I am completely fan girl-ing out and can no longer take me seriously as a writer, but wait! Hear me out. When Mr. Cumberbatch got wind of his fans calling themselves "Cumberbitches,"

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[4] http://matterofcause.com/2014/01/27/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-sexpositive-summerseve/

he saw to it that he set the record straight: there are no "Cumberbitches" just "Cumberpeople." Why didn't he like the clever name? He encouraged fans not to call themselves "Cumberbitches" in order to avoid using a word that is derogatory to women. When I heard that, I knew I had been converted. (Heuwagen, "True Confession.")

This article gave me the confidence I needed to recognize how to translate my personality into a written form. I allowed myself the freedom to express myself without reservation. Ultimately, I found voice for "telling it like it is." Writing has since become a tool for me to express myself honestly without being so reserved in my tone and diction.

The Benedict Cumberbatch piece segues to my third lesson learned—about publicity. Promoting the articles and generating new readers remains a top priority for the continued success of the organization. I helped gain new readers by funneling individuals to the MOC blog. I contacted several fan pages for the major stars mentioned in the article to promote the piece. My Cumberbatch piece was the only internship article I wrote that was successful at generating new readers for MOC through the social media tool, in this case Instagram. I still promoted all work via my personal blog, *A Feminist Life,* but the number of readers I funneled to MOC was very small. Yet, just by using the tag "Benedict Cumberbatch" on several social media outlets to promote the piece, I was able to reach MOC's goal to gain more readers.[5] The piece earned the title of post of the week, with 1500 views (and still climbing), 58 likes, 21 comments, and 28 shares on Facebook.[6]

MOC's strategy to get Facebook friends to share content was simple: share on your personal Facebook page every day and every time something was updated to MOC and then find five friends to share and "like" one article a week. The bloggers would then promote the articles on other social media websites, such as Twitter, Tumblr or Instagram. The various Facebook

friends helped promote MOC's work and it became a successful tool in gaining new readers.

Through this simple strategy, I have discovered that by using multiple social media sites one can generate new readers, but being good at working a social media forum can help keep and maintain the exiting readership longterm. MOC focused on Facebook and was able to steadily gain new "likes" and readers by promoting the articles via its Facebook page. The organization does have a Twitter account and tweets the links, but the primary focus is Facebook. This strategy has worked for MOC. I, on the other hand, am not as comfortable or adept at increasing reach via social media as I would have liked.

Reflection

I enjoyed my time writing for MOC. The experience helped shape me as a writer. With guidance from the leadership, I found my voice and experimented with writing about topics I normally would have shied away from. Still, I could have pushed myself more when writing about controversial topics, such as LGTBQ rights, equal pay, and immigration. I conducted one interview with a distant cousin of mine about her menstruation artwork. But in retrospect, I wish I had made the effort to interview more individuals to bring their stories to MOC's constituencies. MOC's mission is to bring awareness to different voices around the Tampa Bay area, and I feel that I could have done more by reaching out to a variety of people.

Learning to use social media more effectively was a main goal of mine. Upon reflection, I used a lot of self-taught techniques. Some of the techniques such as using images I created for promotional purposes were successful. Others were not. My attempt to reach fan clubs on Tumblr or through Twitter was not fruitful. For the first time I created a Twitter account, even though I found it difficult to use the account to create any success. I researched strategies online to help me in my attempt to garner new readers, but my lack of understanding how the hashtags reached other Twitter users paralyzed my attempts. Given this failure, if I had it to do over, I would work more with MOC leadership to understand their views on how to use Twitter. I also would collaborate more other members of the organization on their strategies and

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[5] A way to use key words to allow readers to easily find the article. I used "Benedict Cumberbatch," "Ryan Gosling" and "Joseph Gordon-Levitt" to name a few.

[6] Metrics given by MOC leadership.

tactics to promote their pieces. I will take these lessons with me to the next stage of my career, wherever that may be.

Takeaways And The Future

Social media is a powerful tool to connect with diverse and differently opinionated individuals from all over the world. I think about working with MOC to write sex positive cyberfeminist articles as implementing activism in my own small corner of the world. I also learned valuable skills for promoting my work. Shareable content incites emotion, offers some value to the reader, facilitates a connection, or is in some way remarkable (Fosco).

While the definitions of being sex positive are still being debated, I have defined sex positivity for myself: being positive about sex included an honest and inclusive approach to sex education, access to health care services for everyone, a code of conduct that requires consent, and an emphasis on sexual pleasure. As a result of working with an editor during my internship, I've improved at articulating these kinds of ideas in writing. Last, I argue that cyberfeminism is a viable approach to social media for changing people's ideas about issues regarding progressive social justice agendas.

That is easier said than done, however. It's not easy to write a connection between my ideas and my readers'. I have found that in the moments when I remained respectful to myself and what I wanted to say, I connected more with readers. Writing under an editor and publisher for an organizational mission was stressful, and learning to understand how to market myself via social media was intimidating. But now I do understand why using social media connects with people and that positioning yourself with a brand, if done well, increases followers and can lead to a new type activism. As a new cyberfeminist activist, I enjoyed sharing my pro-sex message with readers.

When I started this journey, I was a scholar who happened to blog. Blogging was something I did for fun. Now blogging is an outlet for my activism, for the change I wish to help make real. Through my growth as a writer, I came to realize I am a pro-sex feminist, who uses cyberfeminist methods. Perhaps even more important, since this internship, I am not afraid to tell people, whoever will listen, that I am a writer. I am not afraid to produce work that is important to me or reflects my values as a feminist scholar.

For examples of a successful blogger with a social media presence, see: Afeministlife.tumblr.com, https://twitter.com/AFeministLife and http://matterofcause.com/category/bloggers/samantha-heuwagen/

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