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Lori Kido Lopez

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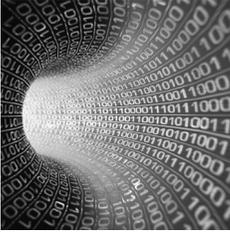
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The radical act of ‘mommy blogging’: redefining motherhood through the blogosphere

LORI KIDO LOPEZ

University of Southern California, USA

Abstract

This article provides an alternative to the masculine construction of the blogosphere by analyzing ‘mommy bloggers’ through the lenses of feminism and autobiography. It uses the event of the 2005 BlogHer conference as a starting point for a discussion about the mommy blogger phenomenon, wherein a constellation of ensuing conversations challenge the use of the title ‘mommy blogger’ and the activities that are encompassed by it. In qualitatively examining the form and content of mommy blogs, this article ultimately argues for their potential to build communities and to challenge dominant representations of motherhood within our society.

Key words

blogging • motherhood • mommy blog • virtual community

INTRODUCTION

Mommy bloggers have officially invaded the blogosphere, luring thousands of readers daily to websites that document countless tales of parenting joys and woes. In Technorati’s ‘State of the Blogosphere 2008’, researchers found that within the 133 million existing online journals, 36 percent of women and 16 percent of men were focusing on family updates (Sifry, 2008). The most

popular mommy blogs can attract more than 50,000 hits per day and collect hundreds of comments per entry. Despite this success, the title of 'mommy blogger' is not always wanted: it can be both a source of pride and a source of embarrassment; it can both compliment and demean.

Nowhere were these dual meanings more clear than at the inaugural BlogHer Conference in San Jose, California in 2005. More than 300 women gathered to discuss their place in the blogosphere through BlogHer, an internet community for women bloggers (www.blogher.org). They were eager to shatter the stigma that women only wrote about children in their weblogs (blogs); they were businesswomen, politicians and cultural commentators. At the end of the conference, a participant announced that if women 'stopped blogging about themselves they could change the world'. The mommy bloggers felt attacked, as if their personal style of writing was somehow less valuable than their colleagues' entries on current events or politics. In response, Alice Bradley, who writes about her children in a blog called 'Finslippy' (<http://finslippy.typepad.com>), declared: 'Mommy blogging is a radical act'. She told the other bloggers that mommy bloggers had felt marginalized throughout the conference, but that their kind of writing was actually very important. Her simple statement caused a ripple effect throughout the blogosphere, as dozens of women in attendance blogged about their reaction to the statement and initiated conversations among their own sets of readers. The next year, an entire session at the conference was devoted to 'Mommy Blogging as a Radical Act'.

The notion of mommy blogging as a radical act is an important one that deserves investigation. Why is it radical and how did it come to be that way? Why is there so much controversy around the title of 'mommy blogger'? Why are mommy bloggers treated differently to other bloggers? Bradley's single statement evoked a maelstrom of emotions, from fury and annoyance to validation and celebration. More importantly, it is connected to a long history of the struggle for women to define their identity in relation to the title of mother.

This article will explore the ways that mommy blogging challenges and reinterprets representations of motherhood. To understand what happened at this conference and why, first it examines the history of the blogosphere, the way that women participate as bloggers and the way that women are treated within the blogosphere. Second, it analyzes the content of the blogs themselves, assessing the way that the discussion around mommy blogging has taken place. What does mommy blogging mean to the writer, to the audience and to those who are completely outside of the conversation? I examine the topic through the lenses of feminism and autobiography in order to see why mommy blogging has come under such intense fire. Finally, I argue for the

positive effects of mommy blogging and the way that it is truly a radical act with the potential to change the discourse surrounding motherhood.

One way to examine the criticism that mommy bloggers received at the conference, as well as in their lives outside the conference, is through the concept of the public/private dichotomy. Motherhood is seen as part of the private or domestic sphere that women are supposed to occupy and not challenge. The public sphere – a place that men inhabit and women desire to belong to – consists of the working world, politics, economics, the law and mainstream discourse (Motiejunaite, 2005). When women bloggers wanted a piece of the blogosphere, it seems that what they wanted was to participate in the public sphere as equals with their male blogging counterparts. As motherhood is commonly viewed as belonging squarely within the private sphere and successful, strong men do not air their dirty laundry in public, so to speak, mommy bloggers did not fit into this equation and were thus criticized for their transgression.

The contentious issue of identifying as a mother can also be examined through looking at representations of motherhood in the media. These representations are everywhere: sitcom mothers telling us jokes on the television, celebrity mothers cradling their babies on magazine covers, radio talk shows giving advice about how to be the best mothers, newspaper stories reporting on the failings of mothers across the country. Such images have helped to mold the notion and performance of motherhood into a problem that causes many women frustration and anxiety. To compound this anxiety, the so-called 'Mommy Wars' have become a favorite topic in the media. Reports in print and broadcast media frequently assert that stay-at-home moms and working mothers – who are, by definition, mutually exclusive and always at odds with one another – are battling over who is the better feminist, who is the better mother and who can 'have it all' (Peskovitz, 2005). While it is debatable as to whether or not there is actually animosity between the two sets of mothers, and unfortunate that only white middle- or upper-class mothers are invoked in such debates, what is important is the way that it has defined all women. Inherent in these arguments is the idea that all women fall into either one camp or the other – the workers or the homebodies – and that all women want children. Furthermore, all women who have children are striving toward their vision of the idealized 'good mother'. This idea is expanded further by Douglas and Michaels (2004), who describe the way in which motherhood has become an all-important title that no one can actually live up to; they call this phenomenon the 'new momism':

The insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new

momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. (2004: 4)

It is no wonder that women are afraid to embrace the identity of mother – the entire concept of being a mother is overwhelming and imbued with failure. Once women become mothers, their lives are taken over by society's strict sets of rules and expectations. In an examination of the way that daughters write about their mothers, Kristi Siegel writes that 'what we view as some sort of innate ideal model of motherhood is always a social construct, an invention rather than a given' (1999: 5). Motherhood is impossible to perform perfectly, it is all-consuming, it places women into dueling camps and forces them to decide which side they are on, and yet it is the one thing that all women are told that they must desire most out of life.

When Bradley proclaimed that mommy blogging was a radical act, she opened up a discussion on these assumptions about women, motherhood and the role of mommy bloggers. The term 'radical act' conjures up images of political dissent, extremism and revolutionary action. Bradley used the term to describe women simply documenting their everyday lives on a website – hardly a revolutionary move. She clarified her statement at the conference later on a blog post:

We're redefining the roles with our blogs. The messages we get about motherhood typically either comes [sic] to us in sanitized or idealized form (television shows, magazine articles) or sensationalized (newspapers). There's nothing in the in-between because the in-between doesn't have a hook, an angle; it doesn't sell. So that's what we're dealing in here. The unexciting, every day, in between stuff. But in doing that, we're also delving into new territory. Into radical territory, I think. (Bradley, 2005)

In the context of both the way in which mommy bloggers have been marginalized within the female blogging community and the way in which the 'new momism' puts such intense pressure on mothers to excel in impossible ways, such writing can most certainly be seen as political. Mommy bloggers are creating a different picture of motherhood to what we see in the mainstream media. Instead of the vision of the loving mother, we see women who are frazzled by the demands of their newborn baby, who have no clue what to do when their child gets sick, who suffer from postpartum depression and whose hormones rage uncontrollably. These are women with immense fan bases, who are critiqued by outsiders but sustained and supported by other women just like them. At the same time, mommy bloggers themselves struggle to embrace this act, and in their struggle expose these myths of motherhood even more starkly.

Women who heard of Bradley's statement or had attended the conference session of the same name began writing responses in their own blogs. This

in turn spawned conversations with their own readers, and the networking of linking and commenting that is part and parcel of the blogger's world was set into action. For this article, I conducted a Google search for the phrase 'mommy blogging is a radical act', and conducted a textual analysis of the entries that contained it, as well as their ensuing entanglement of hyperlinks, in order to determine what was being said about mommy blogs, how it was being said and who was saying it. The 21 blogs that mentioned this phrase or were connected to the conversation in some way were analyzed for the gender, marital status, ethnicity and occupation of their authors.

It is clear that the bloggers who participated in this debate do not necessarily represent the full spectrum of mommy bloggers, and they certainly do not represent the diversity of mothers overall. Of the 21 bloggers who commented on the session, 15 either mentioned outright that they were white or appeared Caucasian in photos on their website. Only two women mentioned that they were not white (they were both of mixed ethnicity, white/Latina and white/Korean; visibly African American women were notably absent). Of the 21 mommy bloggers, 18 mentioned their husband in their blog, one woman mentioned that she was a single mother and only one mentioned that she was divorced (one was unclear). Other than these few exceptions, it is clear that white, married, heterosexual women dominate this conversation. The conversation about motherhood and the BlogHer conference also largely takes place in the USA, with little participation from bloggers residing in other regions of the world. The mommy bloggers are just slightly more diverse when it comes to occupation – a category of particular interest, given the rampant stereotype that all mommy bloggers are stay-at-home moms. Only five bloggers mentioned that they were stay-at-home moms, while nine either worked at home, worked part-time or worked as a writer, which was interpreted as a flexible position that still gave them plenty of time at home with their children. Five were working mothers and the remaining two occupations could not be ascertained from their blogs. Despite the homogeneity of this sample, these blogs still provide an important starting point for a larger discussion of motherhood and its representations in the blogosphere.

WOMEN AND MOMS IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

Blogs are commonly defined as online journals whose entries are displayed in reverse chronological order and updated frequently (Herring et al., 2004). The first blogs were started in the early 1990s, and with the advent of easy-to-use weblog software, the number of blogs has risen to an estimated 133 million – a number that doubles every 200 days (Sifry, 2008). Most of the software used to create blogs is free, which enables anyone with an internet connection to create and maintain their own blog and disseminate their

voice to the world. One of the things that differentiates blogs from other kinds of writing on the web is that they are imbued 'with a strong sense of the author's personality, passions, and point of view' (Nardi et al., 2004: 42). Fans of blogs check for updates on a weekly or even daily basis, hoping to hear more from their favorite commentators. As for the demographics of the blogging community, a recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 54 percent of bloggers are under the age of 30 and that bloggers are evenly divided between men (54%) and women (46%). Also, they are somewhat diverse ethnically – especially in comparison to the 74 percent white population of the general internet population – with 60 percent of bloggers identifying as white, 11 percent African American, 19 percent Hispanic and 10 percent of other ethnicity. The content of a blog is entirely up to the writer and often spans a wide range of topics within a single blog. The most popular content for blogs is the writer's 'life and experiences' (37%), with only 11 percent writing about politics and government (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Studies into the reasons why people blog have found that individuals have a desire to document their own life, express their opinions, have an outlet for catharsis, inspire their own creative juices and participate in a community forum (Nardi et al., 2004).

One of the common ways for women to establish their footprint in the blogosphere has been to write about their children. Several bloggers have become famous for issues surrounding their pregnancy, such as infertility (A Little Bit Pregnant: www.alittlebitpregnant.com), postpartum depression (Dooce: www.dooce.com) or premature birth (Mommy at Home: <http://mommy-at-home.blogspot.com>). However, for the most part, women categorized as 'mommy bloggers' are simply women who are mothers and occasionally write about their own children. The language used in such blogs is extremely informal and usually narrative, and the most popular writers employ a great deal of humor and levity to entertain their audience. The readers of such blogs feel a tremendous closeness and loyalty to the blog's author, as if they are reading the words of a close friend instead of stranger. Topics range from the child being sick and fussy to the kinds of things the child likes to eat, or the funny things they have said recently, but there is an extremely broad diversity in the topics covered outside the arena of motherhood. So-called 'mommies' also write about popular culture, food, current events, politics, their town, the weather, financial issues, their husband and any other possible topic. Nothing is off limits to these writers, and yet the recurrent theme of writing about children positions these women in the category of 'mommy blogger' – a title not wholly unwarranted, as many blogs contain the word 'mommy', 'mama', 'mom' or 'mother' in their title.

Despite the fact that men and women participate equally within the blogosphere, it is important to note that the discourse surrounding blogs

is largely about male bloggers. For example, blogs authored by males are predominant in A-lists of bloggers. In July 2008, the technology website Techcult (2008) published a list of who they deemed to be the 'Top 100 Web celebrities' – nearly all of whom were bloggers – and only 11 were women. Other sites such as Technorati (www.technorati.com) and Cnet (www.cnet.com) have had similar rankings that list the top bloggers on the internet, and women generally comprise only a paltry handful of entries. Similarly, in the world of academia, a focus on male bloggers dominates the discourse. Possibly, this discrepancy can be attributed to the different content that men and women tend to favor. Research by Herring et al. (2004) found that males were more likely to produce filter blogs, which aggregate news and politics information, or knowledge-logs, which are focused on technology. Women were more likely to produce journal-type blogs that focused on personal expression and experiences, and these kinds of blogs far outnumbered the more talked-about filter blogs. Herring et al. (2004) concluded that it was 'hardly a coincidence that all of these practices reinscribe a public valuing of behaviors associated with educated adult (white) males, and render less visible behaviors associated with members of other demographic groups'.

Another way to examine this discrepancy is to look at the history of women's diaries and journals, as the modern phenomenon of blogging can be seen as an extension of women's earlier forms of narrativizing personal experience. This is a particularly apt comparison, given that blogs can be seen as a remediation of the diary or journal into an internet form, and that there are many formal elements of the two media which can be compared. However, it is also an important comparison because of the many similarities between female bloggers and female diarists or autobiographers in the way that they have been treated in the academy. As with female bloggers, female autobiographers also have faced challenges within the world of the traditionally male autobiographer. The historically private world of women has been largely left out of the realm of literature and 'since traditional autobiographies highlight a person's spiritual and cultural course, women – who are socially constructed as bodies – have to work doubly hard to be "worthy" autobiographical subjects' (Siegel, 1999: 6). As the role of mother is demarcated even further as lowly and distinct from the world of literature and culture, it follows that mother must make a particularly convincing argument as to why their autobiographical writing deserves to exist. Domna Stanton went so far as to coin the term 'autogynography' as a way to distinguish the works of female autobiographers, which were being critically ignored in autobiography scholarship (Siegel, 1999).

This connection between blogs and other forms of women's writing cements the necessity of examining the contributions of women to the

blogosphere, as their exclusion must be noted and remedied. Also, it is important to continue to ask how this exclusion manifests itself in unexpected ways, as it is critical to assess the ways that women express themselves and make their voices heard. If the internet provides both a forum for the broadcasting of women's voices and the community to support that voice, then we should be paying much more attention to the work that is happening on these websites.

BLOGHER AND RADICAL ACTS

In response to the male-centered, male-authored blogosphere, a community of women began to organize. Elisa Camahort, Jory Des Jardins and Lisa Stone founded an online community called BlogHer in 2005. The community provided not only a space for discussion, but also an annual conference for women bloggers. The mission of BlogHer was to create

a network for women bloggers to draw on for exposure, education, and community. By holding a day-long conference ... and establishing an online hub, BlogHer is initiating an opportunity for greater visibility, learning and success for individual women bloggers and for the community of bloggers as a whole. (Lowery, 2005)

Their first conference, held in July 2005, brought together female and male bloggers (fewer than 5% male) for discussions and networking in the hope of dispelling the myth that women were not bloggers. While many considered the event to be a great success, the role of mommy bloggers at the conference proved to be controversial. Despite the fact that only 28 percent of attendees classified themselves as 'family' bloggers (35% blogged about technology and 36% about current events) (Stone, 2005), many attendees complained about the feeling that the conference was primed for mommies. Mommy bloggers in attendance were hurt by comments such as 'She's a good writer. For a mommy blogger' (Sweetney, 2005), while other women wanted to use the conference as an opportunity to make the statement that 'we are not just mommy bloggers' (Sabater, 2005), distancing themselves from the stereotype that all women who blogged wrote about their children. Even on this occasion, which was marked as one to celebrate women of all kinds, the mothers were being criticized. It quickly became clear that women who wrote about their children were not allowed into the discussions carried on by other women in the blogosphere – other women who wrote about things such as technology and current events. As one of the founders of BlogHer wrote:

[M]ore than a few MommyBloggers felt there was a distinction being drawn by some other bloggers between people blogging about 'important' stuff, and people 'just' blogging about their feelings, their families and the joys and struggles of parenting. (Camahort, 2006a)

It was within this environment that Alice Bradley made her statement that mommy blogging was a radical act.

The response to her statement was so positive that an entire session was dedicated to the issue at BlogHer 2006, and yet the controversy surrounding the issue of mommy bloggers intensified. The number of attendees at the second conference was more than double the number of the first conference, which meant that there were many first-timers. One attendee complained that 'it seemed like a mommyblogger's conference' (Populi, 2006), while others were insulted that the free gift bags included a bib and a condom, as if everyone at the conference was a heterosexual mother, declaring that 'small and large things gave credence to the notion that BlogHer 06 was the year of the mommybloggers' (Jones, 2006). An attendee wrote up the following anecdote in her blog:

An audience member got up and contributed a comment during the closing discussion on Day Two. She said something like, 'There are a lot of married women with children here...' I thought she was going to segue into making a point about how we're not all heterosexual married mothers. But to my surprise her statement – and it was just a statement at that point – was interrupted with a big round of applause. (Casino, 2006)

Clearly, the feud between mommies and non-mommies was still brewing. The female blogging community was conflicted over how to deal with the role that mommy bloggers play, but one fact became clear: whether they were being criticized or embraced, finally mommy bloggers were being recognized as an important force to be reckoned with.

Many bloggers who commented on the 'Mommy Blogging as a Radical Act' session saw the topic as a springboard for a discussion about the actual title of 'mommy blogger'. They struggled to decide whether they should call themselves mommy bloggers, and whether it was acceptable for others to give them this name. The underlying feeling seemed to be that the name 'mommy blogger' was inherently belittling and cast their website in an unfavorable light. This frustration is understandable if we actually look at the term itself and what the choice of words implies. The use of the diminutive 'mommy' literally weakens the already less powerful subject position of the title 'Mom', which is

a term used only by children ... [it] doesn't have the authority of 'mother,' because it addresses us from a child's eye view. It assumes a familiarity, an approachability, to mothers that is, frankly, patronizing; reminiscent, in fact, of the difference between woman and girl. (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 19–20)

Some might feel that quibbling over the title is irrelevant because they have been given that title for the sake of simplifying discussion, and enough have embraced it to the point that now it is their generic name. However, in

this particular case, it is completely reasonable for women to resist the title of 'mommy blogger' and its implications.

Furthermore, these women worried that to give themselves this name was to take away from their other identities: a problem that has deep roots and can be interpreted through the discourse of diaries and autobiographies. Mommy bloggers have a great deal in common with diarists (of the pen and paper variety) and autobiographers. In both blogging and the act of writing one's autobiography, an important feature is foregrounding the construction of the 'modern individual self' (Kitzmann, 2003: 51). In the act of writing from one's own subjectivity about one's own life, one appears to be creating a bounded identity. It is seemingly from this act that the title of 'mommy blogger' is given to these women. They are mothers who write about their children, and so the identity that has been created is one that largely includes motherhood. Yet, as with keeping a diary or writing one's own autobiography, blogging is actually an act that relies heavily on fragmentation; 'autobiographies, as description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representations' (Gilmore, 1998: 184). The self that emerges from a blog is neither cohesive nor singular, but instead determined through an amalgamation of conflicting elements.

One of the easiest ways to view the fragmentation of identity represented in blogs is through the 'tags' given to entries. Tags are descriptive categories or labels attributed to a blog entry, usually listed at the bottom of each entry. A list of tags, sometimes labeled as 'topics' or 'categories', can usually be found somewhere on the main page of the blog, which gives the reader access to similarly themed entries. For a mommy blog, titles might include 'motherhood', 'shopping', 'travel', 'babysitters', 'food and drink' or 'photography'. The very act of tagging clearly differentiates the various modes of expression contained on the website. Not all blogs employ tags, but the ones that do give us a wealth of information as to the scope of each writer's subject matter. It is telling that the list of tags on most mommy blogs includes a vast range of subjects outside of parenting, and that plenty of entries have nothing to do with parenting at all.

Another way to approach this issue of the fragmented self is to view blogs as a database narrative. Lev Manovich argues that while the novel and cinema 'privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate – the database' (2001: 5). A database is organized in hierarchical structures, but there is no direct causal link between discrete items. Blogs function in exactly the same way, as individual entries stand alone and do not necessarily or intentionally connect to other entries, thematically or sequentially.

Sorapure argues that this construction of blogs conflicts with traditional ideas of the unified self:

Representing the self in a database form ... develops and reflects a sense of identity as constituted by fragments and segments ... In an online diary, pieces of information about the self may be brought together in different configurations, signifying multiple and shifting ways of understanding the self. (2003: 7–8)

If this is the case, then the title of 'mommy blogger' is clearly a misnomer, as these blog authors are not bounded by the confines of such a title. However, it must be mentioned that many women openly embrace the title. Further, when Alice Bradley declared that mommy blogging was a radical act, she imbued the name of 'mommy blogger' with power. One woman wrote in response:

I've never thought of myself as a mommy blogger until I started writing *Diary of Single Mom on the Edge*. I was always a mom who blogged. I didn't want to be labeled or tied down. I still struggle with it. But I love writing about *all* my personal experiences, and the way that I mother is vitally important not only to me, but to the world. Yeah, I'm a fucking mommy blogger. But that's not all I am. (Armstrong, 2006)

While it is possible for the name 'mommy blogger' to be desirable and powerful, let us not forget the earlier discussion of the new momism and its impossible demands, the notion of a 'Mommy War' waged across women's bodies, and the conflicting emotions that a woman could feel when she is left with nothing but a singular, diminutive title. The hesitation of these women at embracing such a title is completely understandable and justified.

MOMMIES AS CONSUMERS

As mommy bloggers gained visibility through media coverage, conferences and websites whose popularity stretched beyond the confines of the mommy blogging community, advertisers took note. When the 2006 BlogHer conference rolled around, a new session had sprung up entitled '\$\$\$ Generation'. The description for the session read:

There are many ways to monetize your blog. It's hard to keep track. What's the difference between BlogAds and AdSense Chitika and LinkShare and does ad placement really matter? Hint: Jennifer Slegg will tell you 'yes'. (Workerbees, 2006)

Mommy bloggers had been officially outed as a prime commodity audience for advertisers. With the combination of thousands of eyeballs and an undeniable consumer market for all manners of baby products, it was only a matter of time before advertisers began snatching up real estate on the best blogs.

The allure of the parent market had not gone unnoticed by the blogging community, and a new element introduced at the 2006 conference was the launch of the BlogHer Ad Network. The group helped to create relationships between advertisers and women bloggers. The initial test group for the program consisted only of parent bloggers, from which a small group had been profiled by BlogHer and found to provide the ideal demographics for advertisers. Readers of parent blogs were highly educated, website-loyal, married with children, wealthy and female – which is to say that they were quite likely to purchase items they found advertised on their favorite websites (Camahort, 2006b). Women always have been hailed by advertisers because of their spending habits, and mothers serve as particularly good consumers because they also make purchases on behalf of their entire family. Of the blogs profiled for this study, 12 of the 23 blogs contained ads, mostly from the BlogHer Ad Network. While the BlogHer Ad Network eventually opened up to include more than mommy bloggers, it is important to note the role that it played in the beginning of this venture and to ask what the repercussions were.

The success of mommy bloggers in attracting the attention of advertisers and successfully wrangling a way to make money from their websites potentially could be seen as a step forward for mothers. In a study of the political economy of the lesbian/gay identity, Fred Fejes argues:

it seems the acceptance of lesbians and gay males as sexual/political subjects is predicated on their acceptance and importance as consuming subjects ... in their role as consumers, particularly as a defined market niche attractive to advertisers ... they are offered the surest route to equality. (2002: 197)

Parents have long been identified as consumers through other advertising avenues, but in this case they are actually the frontrunners of a move toward using blogs as an entrepreneurial endeavour. In this sense, if we adapt Fejes' logic to parents as political subjects through their role as consumers, it would seem as if the BlogHer Advertisers Network is an important move towards the better treatment of mothers. However, despite this positive potential, Fejes also notes:

[T]he political benefits of this marketing attention are not all that clear ... being highly valued by marketers means nothing politically unless there is also a strong political movement that presses for political rights and equality. (2002: 203)

As yet, mommy bloggers have not come together to tackle social justice or political issues such as parental leave, the cost of daycare and healthcare, workplace equity or any other issues that might benefit from their grass roots mobilization and community organizing.

Mommy bloggers are striving to find their political voice, but in the meantime the backlash against mothers who employ ads on their websites is fierce, which further weakens the potentially positive impact of advertising on mothers as political agents. One of the most famous bloggers on the internet – Heather Armstrong (otherwise known as Dooce) – makes enough money from the ads that blogging has become her full-time job, and she can support her husband and child fully. Yet she commonly receives flak for her use of ads, ranging from ‘The new dooce site screams “sell-out” in a really busy, sell-outy way ... So distracting. So disappointing’ to:

If I wanna see that many ads, I’ll go to yahoo or whatever ... I’m sure writing little posts about what your daughter, husband, family does is HARD work, but pardon me if I don’t do that everyday and don’t get paid for it and sell cute pictures, etc. Stop the madness, get jobs. (Armstrong, 2005).

Unfortunately, the resentment displayed on Armstrong’s site was part of a larger condemnation of women who participated in the money-making venture of putting ads on their blogs. One blogger, whose site remains ad-free, wrote:

Many bloggers say they will not let the ads affect the editorial content. I question this statement. How long will this last? What if Apple Computers offers someone \$10,000 to have an ad on their site? Are you really going to say anything negative about Apple in your ramblings? I doubt it. So now the honesty of the writing is affected. The more ads that appear on blogs the less we will all trust in honesty of the medium as a whole. (Smith, 2005)

There was clearly a perception that content would be compromised in the selling of advertising space on women’s blogs. In the midst of a online rant, one woman summarized her feelings about the political economy of mommy bloggers which was tied to their homogeneity:

Yay, a bunch of upper-middle-class women have built a community – a community based on trading recommendations on, and comparison shopping for, overpriced shit they didn’t even *have* when I was a baby. Mommy bloggers make me hate capitalism, and people, I normally *love* capitalism. (Damen, 2006; emphasis in original)

While a fear of over-commodification and branding is likely to be common when any formerly advert-free space is purchased by the corporate world, unfortunately it was mommy blogs that took the brunt of the criticism with BlogHer’s fledgling program. However, this connection could be more than a coincidence: it is also possible that mothers were being targeted unfairly due to assumptions that women do not participate in impersonal entrepreneurial endeavors, or that mothers somehow operate in a world separate from the need for cold, hard cash.

A STRONG COMMUNITY OF MOTHERS

Despite the fact that mommy bloggers struggle under the weight of an intensified, public version of the myth of motherhood and are criticized for their commercial endeavors, it is evident from nearly every post about the BlogHer conference and the 'Mommy Blogging Is a Radical Act' session that women enjoy validation and solidarity from their participation in mommy blogging. This makes sense, given that blogging does not happen in a vacuum – by its very nature, blogging invites an audience to participate in discussions, share ideas and vocalize support for other participants. Blogs utilize the interactivity of internet writing in such a way that 'the immediacy of its publishing enhances that aspect of diary writing concerned not with solitary and private reflection, but with communication and community' (Sorapure, 2003: 10). As one blogger stated, there are 'three things I love about blogging: the sense of community, the connection with other people, and the chance to tell my stories to a receptive audience' (Danigirl, 2006).

In a case study of the 'Julie/Julia' project – a blog about one woman's cooking endeavors – Blanchard (2006) investigates whether or not blogs can be considered to be virtual communities, which she defines by feelings of membership, influence, emotional connection and fulfillment of needs. Although she ultimately finds that only a small number of readers of the Julie/Julia project fulfill these conditions, her study gives useful information about what a functional virtual community might look like. These notions of virtual communities in the context of mommy bloggers can be investigated further through scientific research on communication and motherhood. Oakley (1992) examines the potential correlation between low birthweight and social support given to the mother. She notes that support can include many factors, but particularly notes that 'emotional support includes intimacy and attachment, reassurance, and being able to confide in and rely on another ... one is a member of the group, not a stranger' (1992: 29). Furthermore, social support is defined by interconnectedness and networks of 'shared norms, values and ideologies' (1992: 29). I would argue that blogging communities possess all of these qualities – when participating in blogrolling¹ and commenting on one another's posts, women are validating each other, displaying active listening and defining their own communities. In a post inspired by the discussions on mommy blogs, one woman wrote:

Finding blogs helped me tremendously. I found moms (and dads) who had struggled with similar issues to mine, and I learned that blogs were a great place to share your faults and admit that this parenting thing ain't easy. From there I carved out my space, and was so relieved to have this space to share my feelings. Mommyblogs are the new advice manuals, but they're so much better than expert opinions. They're stories from the trenches – real, honest, and sometimes raw – and they are also advice manuals with a community built around them. (A Mommy Story, 2006)

From this entry and others with a similar message, it is possible to see that these communities gain strength from their democratic spirit: instead of learning about parenting from experts or institutions, this generation of parents prefers to garner wisdom from those who are striving alongside them. It is community-building in the classic oral tradition, harkening to a time when women shared stories between each other instead of relying on institutions or male experts for advice on childrearing; for example, Dr Spock's industry of self-help advice. For yet another argument for the power of the mommy blogging community, we can turn to those who despise them. One former mommy blogger-hater voiced his reluctant admiration of the power of their community-building:

Mommy bloggers are looked down upon (even by me, for a while). Sippy cup toting, peanut butter giving, butt wiping adoration, depression, exaltation. These moms are creating community without even one company's aggregation. They are doing it by themselves, the way we geeks used to do it. (Ritter, 2006)

It is clear that even the detractors are forced to admit that if mommy bloggers are good at anything, it is forming a strong community.

There is a physical component to community-building as well, even of the virtual variety. Oakley argues that the pregnant women she interviewed for her study enjoyed the benefits of being socially supported because researchers listened to their thoughts and concerns. Women commented that they benefited from the conversations that they had with researchers and generally felt positive about their participation in the project. While birthweights were not affected by this social support to a statistically significant level, Oakley argues that there were certainly health benefits to the social support. Similarly, I argue for the importance of social support in the context of mommy blogging, given that women often initiate themselves into this online community when they first become pregnant and then continually participate once they have had kids in order to support other women. If mommy bloggers are truly forming communities and the evidence for this is strong, then this kind of community is vastly beneficial for the physical wellbeing of the mothers who participate.

CONCLUSION

As we look at the way that these women wrestle under the expectations and implications of the title that has been given to them, attempt to earn an income but are criticized for doing so, and eventually find strength in the community they have worked to create, we find many reasons to be optimistic. Mommy bloggers are developing their own voice for discussing motherhood, and it is distinctly different from the radiant image of the good mother that has dominated our media, with its impossible demands

and assumptions about women. Women who blog about their children are transforming their personal narratives of struggle and challenge into interactive conversations with other mothers, and in so doing, are beginning to expand our notion of motherhood, women bloggers and the mother's place within the public sphere. In this sense, showing the ugly side of motherhood has the potential to be liberating and beneficial for all women. Not all women enjoy being mothers or know what to do once they become one. As Barbara Barnett explains, it is of critical importance to note that

race, class and sexual orientation can affect the circumstances in which women mother; that motherhood is not desired by all women; and that ideals of what motherhood should be often are far different from the day-to-day realities of child care. (2006: 412)

This is a message that is all the more imperative, considering that her research examines the complex causes behind mothers who murder their own children.

As we have seen from these blogs, motherhood can be overwhelming and exhausting, hilarious and exuberant, dirty and disruptive, all at once. The uniquely fragmented format of blogs has the potential to capture this multifaceted portrait and underscore the everyday repetition of the role of the mother in a way that no other medium has been able to accomplish thus far. While blogs mirror the structure of women's diaries – a genre which has long been disparaged as the whiny complaints of worthless women – these collections of writing, which still contain complaints and what might be considered insignificant dramas, are given new power when they are posted on the internet for the public to view and discuss. Instead of writing for one's own satisfaction and record-keeping, bloggers deliberately craft their narratives so that others can recognize their similarities and shared interests.

While the blogs initially may attract only other mothers, as seen in this study, the conversation is still open and visible to outsiders, and in time the conversation about motherhood may expand beyond the limits of tightly-knit mommy blogging communities. Moreover, the explicit political issues that mothers face, such as discrimination in the workplace or the inadequacy of childcare, may begin to be addressed now that the community is beginning to grow and organize themselves around their collective issues. In the future, meetings between women bloggers at physical conferences such as those held by BlogHer may be an opportunity to discuss these potential collaborations and opportunities for action.

This study is limited by the small size of the media sample and the homogeneity of the bloggers analyzed indicates a need for more discussion about who is participating in the blogosphere and who is highlighted within

the community of bloggers. In particular, the absence of women of color and mothers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds is important to acknowledge and investigate. Their absence mirrors the digital divide in other internet communities and technological forums, but may be the result of more than mere access to technology. The notion of a secondary digital divide additionally encompasses the various social and cultural norms that may influence the way in which an individual interacts with technology – a situation that particularly impacts women of color (Cheong, 2007). In any case, an expanded examination of this phenomena would be beneficial, so that we could more fully understand the way that mothers of all kinds are being represented and included in this online discourse.

Note

- 1 Blogrolling: a collection of links to other blogs advertised on one's own site, which include blogs on common subject matter, personal friends and/or blogs that one reads.

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LORI KIDO LOPEZ is a doctoral candidate in communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Her main area of research interest is representations of race and gender in the media.

Address: Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, 3502 Watt Way, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA. [email: LoriL@usc.edu]
