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Blogs and Book Promotion

Measuring Success

by Melanie Figueroa
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Research Question: *As publishing houses' marketing budgets shrink, blog tours have become an increasingly common tool for book promotion, but what evidence exists to either support or disprove the claim that blog tours are an effective means of driving book sales and connecting with readers?*

Introduction

In the 2006 article “The Blog Phenomenon and the Book Publishing Industry,” published in *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Meredith Nelson begins to explore the impact that blogs would go on to have on the book publishing industry over the following decade. Since Nelson’s article, little more scholarly work has broached the subject of books and blogs specifically, but in an industry that has remained remarkably similar for hundreds of years, it’s no surprise that much of Nelson’s research still proves true today. Marketing budgets are shrinking, attention spans are waning, and reading is—and always will be—incredibly subjective. If books in a digital world are to succeed, Nelson points out, “it’s very important that marketers find populations of people who really want to engage with their books” (11). That is where publishers and authors hope blogs can help.

Blogs have transitioned far beyond the “weblogs” of the nineties and early 2000s. In 2008, Daniel Green, a member of the now defunct Litblog Co-op, wrote in a post titled “Stock-Taking” that he expected “an increase in blogs offering longer-form commentary and criticism, as opposed to the link-centered blog that defined the literary weblog in its first years of existence.” Foreseeing, like so many others, the decline of literary coverage in traditional media outlets, Green went on, saying, “I still believe the time may come when blogs and other forms of online publishing will dominate the literary discussion.” While blogs may not yet dominate the discussion surrounding books, they are certainly in the running—and publishers have taken notice. Book Riot, a popular book blog, for example, has over 300,000 likes on Facebook alone (and nearly 80,000 followers on Twitter). But there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of other book blogs, each with their own focus and audience. Publishers, like the independent Melville House based in Brooklyn and London, maintain their own blogs. Melville’s is called *MobyLives!*, and, if you scroll through its collection of posts, there’s hardly a trace of the stink of “promotion.” Instead, Melville’s blog

has an impressive range of industry news, commentary, and interviews that go far beyond their own catalog. Best-selling authors, such as John Green, use blogging platforms like Tumblr to interact directly with their readers. Green also vlogs, a form of blogging using video as the medium, with his brother, Hank Green, on a YouTube channel that currently boasts over two million subscribers. The reality is that these blogosphere influencers have a farther reach than the circulations of some of the most highly respected print publications out there today.

In the wake of this new method of digital book marketing, authors and publishers have begun using blogs as a platform to host “virtual book tours,” also known as blog tours (Nelson 12). While some “tours” may be accidental—a blogger requests a review copy, writes about it, and the buzz spreads around the web like wildfire—others are much more orchestrated and deliberate. Tours also look different for each author and title. Some last days while others last weeks, each with a wide range of “stops.” Some exist as the author’s main publicity push, while others are only a single component of a larger outreach plan. Blog tour companies have even sprung up to offer their services, catering especially to the independent publishing niche. With or without the use of these companies, hosting a blog tour remains relatively low-cost, if not free. In Nelson’s article, she ends by speculating “it’s likely that literary blogs and blogging book clubs will become more powerful or influence sales more.” That was nearly ten years ago, but today, it seems that the impact of these blogs is still elusive. The question remains: As publishing houses’ marketing budgets shrink, blog tours have become an increasingly common tool for book promotion, but what evidence exists to either support or disprove the claim that blog tours are an effective means of driving book sales and connecting with readers?

The Approach To a Blog Tour

Regardless of the title, the author, or the publisher, the approach to orchestrating a blog tour remains the same. For instance, book marketers at the publishing house Holtzbrinck offer the blogger a free book, suggest that they read the book, and then, perhaps, that they write about it in their blog (Nelson 11). That's the pitch. Before one gets to that step, however, a great deal of time and effort is spent researching. In a blog post titled "What's in a blog tour?," Margo Pecha, a graduate student attending Portland State University's writing and book publishing program, wrote, "A lot of thought is put into what your author can contribute to another person's blog...every email should be personalized so that it best meets what the blog's mission, goal, or theme is." In 2014, Pecha put together a small blog tour for Ooligan Press's nonfiction title, *The Wax Bullet War*. In her effort, Pecha followed much of the advice offered by industry experts like Jeff Gomez, vice president of Online Consumer Sales and Marketing at Penguin Group USA, by researching and developing relationships with bloggers who shared an interest in issues like PTSD and war memoirs. As Gomez said, "Bloggers, especially, do not want to feel randomly selected or like one of many influencers being solicited. Marketers should actually read the blog, customize the package, and personalize the offer and interaction with the blogger" (Nelson 12). Altogether, the tour had three stops, with each blog reaching a combined audience of over 2,500 followers across various social media platforms. According to data received from Nielsen BookScan, sales showed no increase on or around the days following the features in each of these blogs. Today, services like NetGalley, which "delivers digital galleys, often called advance reading copies, or ARCs, to professional readers and helps promote new and upcoming titles," exist to aid publishers with researching blogs. Publishers can use this tool to not only facilitate a book tour, but plan one using comparative titles (Tavella).

Blogs and Their Relationships With Publishers, Authors, and Readers

Publishers view blogs as providing several benefits. Blog tours allow authors and publishers to save marketing and publicity costs on titles by either skipping physical book tours entirely or reducing the amount of stops on them (Méndez). According to Nelson, “the main costs [of orchestrating a blog tour] include salaries, the cost of maintaining computer systems and Internet access, overhead costs, shipping costs, and the cost of providing books or other materials for bloggers” (11). These costs remain extremely low compared to traditional book marketing. Even with the use of blog tour companies, publishers and authors save on expenses normally set aside for travel and lodging. Blogs also offer new avenues for advertising. They’re attractive because of their focused topics and audiences, but because blog traffic, compared to television or newspapers, is relatively low, so is the cost of advertisements. Companies like Blogads have rates ranging from \$10 to \$10,000 per week, with most being sold at the \$10 rate (Nelson 13). Rates can also be negotiated directly with the blogger.

Blogs can act as resources of data for publishers. According to Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, two researchers at the Pew Research Center, “Eight percent of internet users, or about 12 million American adults, keep a blog. Thirty-nine percent of internet users, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs.” Since nearly two-thirds of bloggers write about a variety of topics, including books, blogs present publishers with several opportunities (Fox and Lenhart). For one, “Publishers should be ‘listening’ to discussions on blogs to spot trends and monitor readers’ opinions about their books” (Nelson 9). Readers’ individual tastes are highly selective and varied, and so are the blogs that represent those readers. Publishers can find small communities focused on specialized topics to mine information and should regard bloggers as “influencers” that go on to inspire other bloggers and readers (some of which are usually both). According to Nelson, “bloggers follow

breaking news, trends, and other blogs in order to have material to post to their sites.” In other words, they find and perpetuate buzz as much as they create it.

Blogs are community-based with immeasurable reaches. Many bloggers do not have information about their sites traffic statistics; of those that do, about 22 percent say they have fewer than ten hits a day in blog traffic, 17 percent say they have anywhere from ten to ninety-nine hits a day, and 13 percent say they have more than 100 hits a day, with a handful reporting even larger levels of traffic (Fox and Lenhart). According to Lenhart and Fox’s research, “While Web servers traditionally collected information about who or what visits them, in this day and age of RSS feeds, many blog readers who might have been counted by server or site traffic logs are now obscured behind the single visit of an RSS feed reader’s URL or IP address.” In other words, while the percentages above reflect self-reported statistics, blogs may have much larger audiences than bloggers are aware of. Blogs often provide blogrolls on their home page of other, popular blogs they follow as well. In fact, nearly 41 percent of bloggers have such lists (Fox and Lenhart). The blogging community supports one another, reading and sharing each other’s posts. This means the impact of one post can ripple throughout the blogosphere.

There are, however, pitfalls to be aware of when planning a blog tour as well. For one, bloggers given books are under no obligation to actually publish anything about them, review or otherwise. Bloggers who purchase books on their own, on the other hand, are free to publish their own opinions and easily able to make them public. There is the potential that this could lead to excess shipping and labor costs—excess meaning that these costs produced minimal, if any, commercial gain. Bloggers are not necessarily professionals or consistent. Lenhart’s and Fox’s research also found that “70% of bloggers only post when inspiration strikes, while 22% of bloggers usually update on a regular schedule.” These bloggers do not generally spend a great deal of time on their blogs either, working on them

roughly one to two hours per week. Even if a blog does publish an excerpt, interview, or review of a title, it's important to be sure that the blog is both in fact a legitimate publication and a respected influencer. In 2013, Lev Raphael, an author, reviewer, and blogger, wrote in a Huffington Post article titled "Planning a Blog Tour? Think Twice." of his own blog tour:

One blogger never ran a review, re-scheduled, then still didn't run it. Nine other reviews did run, ranging from good to excellent. But some were cursory, and a number of them were by bloggers who apparently didn't believe in proofreading, and weren't very good writers to begin with. I found the latter aspect of the tour dispiriting.

Sometimes, even the blog hosting the tour doesn't receive traffic. According to Susie, the "Bitch-in-Chief" at the *Insatiable Booksluts*, in the post "Do blog tours and extended promotions actually turn followers off?" published in 2013 "The author's fans and organizer's fans don't know me from Eve. They don't trust me and have little reason to come visit my blog even if linkage abounds...Meanwhile, the blog's regular readers have already sniffed out 'promotion' and are probably skipping right over the post." Not all of these pitfalls apply to the organizations and individuals hosting and planning the tour alone.

The question has become, what do readers get from blog tours? Authors and publishers receive a direct connection with potential readers and sales. Blogs receive free content and potential traffic—maybe even free books. Readers, on the other hand, may receive nothing. Later in Susie's post, she writes, "What I find about extended events and blog tours is this: after the first couple of days, reader participation drops way off." After viewing a large amount of similar posts in a short time span, readers get fatigued and "feel spammed." If the posts are simply about the book or author, the readers likely to be most

excited are already invested in the author or what the author represents. Meaning, whatever information is conveyed through blog posts, to these readers, is largely old news.

Blog Tours and Book Sales

Within this paper, the word “potential” is tacked on to words like sales, and that is largely because measuring the sales received from blog tours is difficult. When looking at information that is self-reported by authors, the opinions are mixed, generally weighing more heavily on the “I wish I hadn’t wasted my time” front (Raphael). On *The Alliance of Independent Author’s Self-Publishing Advice Blog*, indie author Gregory Delaurentis writes of the results of his own blog tour, “Everyday my Facebook likes increased and my Twitter followers ballooned. This is what I wanted.” But what about sales? Delaurentis writes, “Don’t worry if there’s no immediate gain in sales during and after a tour. Just consider that the seeds have been sown and that eventually you will see a rise in sales.” Not everyone agrees, however. Not even indie authors who *do* see slight increases in sales. In his own blog post, Ron Vitale wrote that despite giving away over 100 books and selling over forty of the Kindle and Nook version, he earned only \$17.80 in sales. After including the cost of hiring a company to organize the tour, Vitale was \$57.20 in the negative. Regardless of the connections with readers and writers and the rise in Amazon rankings, Vitale writes, “Would I do an event like this again? Honestly, probably not. I spent a lot of time for very little return.” What’s more is that each author defines successful sales differently. For example, indie author Quanie Miller writes of her experiences with tours, “Even if that blog only reaches one person who bought your book, depending on how much you paid for the tour, that might still be worth it: if that person likes your book they will tell their friends, and their friends will tell their friends, and so forth.”

In 2011, when Matt Haig’s 2010 ALA Alex Award-winning novel *The Radleys* was

reprinted, the book was promoted on a three-week blog tour; the tour presents another case study. According to the blog tour's page on Simon & Schuster's website, "Each Friday, we will select one person who commented on all participating blogs for that week to win a prize. The winner will be announced each Monday on Helen and Rowan's twitter accounts @Helen_Radley and @rowanradley and in the next Monday's blogger's post." The prize was a signed copy of the book and some blood-red hot chocolate, fitting for fans of a book about vampires. The first week of the blog tour took place from September 19–23, 2011, and a post was published each day of the week. According to data found on Nielsen BookScan, sales of the original hardcover edition of Haig's novel dropped significantly after the reprints publication, by almost 100 percent. However, the new trade paperback edition of *The Radleys* was seeing a 35 percent increase in sales. Note that this increase was calculated based on the previous week's sales of the hardcover edition and not the paperback's, as it had not yet been released. The second week of the blog tour took place from September 26–30, and, again, a post was published each day of the week. This week, the paperback sales increased again, by 9 percent. The third week of the blog tour took place from October 3–10, and, again, a post was published each day of the week. This week, sales began to taper off, dropping by 24 percent. Three months later, while sales on a week-to-week basis had remained relatively steady, they had decreased by about another 75 percent overall.

The above examples show little evidence of a direct link between blog tours and sales. They also demonstrate a few problems. Blog tours occur when a title is fresh and, generally, already selling at its peak levels, making determining the impact of the blogs, as one mode of promotion, difficult to quantify. Three years before Daniel Green wrote of his thoughts on the future of book blogs and the end of the Litblog Co-op, the *Los Angeles Times* published the article "United by a love for literature," which announced the co-op's formation. The co-op, according to their website, served to unite "the leading literary

weblogs for the purpose of drawing attention to the best of contemporary fiction, authors and presses that are struggling to be noticed in a flooded marketplace.” The Los Angeles blogger, Mark Sarvas, who brought the group of nearly twenty bloggers together said of the co-op, “The mission is to see what happens when 10 to 20 lit bloggers get behind a title and push hard. Does it make a difference [in sales]?” (Martelle). According to Green, it didn’t. Though the co-op never fully lived up to its mission, Green’s blog post began a discussion of the use of literary blogs, writing “whatever authority literary blogs do attain will be much more widely dispersed, not concentrated in organized groups pretending to encompass the ‘best’ available judgment about current fiction or poetry.” For Green, the litblog co-op seemed to reestablish that blogs reflect “niche” interests, causing readers to find bloggers who discuss the types of books they’d like to read rather than publications that aim to encompass a wide array of genres. The numbers, it would seem, also reestablish this.

Blog Tours as an Effective Means of Book Promotion

Most of the findings and voices out there suggest that blog tours remain effective tools, primarily, for new and emerging authors, as many of the benefits derived from blog tours involve building a fan base rather than generating instant sales. Shailyn Tavella, an associate publicist at Minotaur Books, judges the success of a blog tour on many levels:

Of course if there is a lot of interest in having the book reviewed or a Q&A with an author, on several blogs, it is a success. If there are many positive comments on a blog with people adding the book to their to be read pile, it is a success. And lastly and most importantly if the author seems to have felt fulfilled and excited about the experience it is a great success.

Book tours help authors in the long run by increasing their chance of visibility. Publishers should not discount blogs. It may be interesting to note that Nelson uses the phrase “word-of-mouth promotion” to describe one of the opportunities of blogs as a tool for book promotion. Online exposure—and therefore discussion—can lead to conversations taking place in the “real world.” Tavella’s comments also demonstrate how, for a publisher, blog tours may be a way to drum up attention that both pleases and impresses an author without breaking the bank, improving relationships with authors. By manipulating the blogosphere, however, publishers and authors also risk manipulating the data. If trends are influenced by the exchange of money for advertisements and connections within the industry—if blogging becomes too commercialized—blogs risk losing the very characteristic that drew readers to them in the first place. Publishers and authors looking to plan a blog tour need to be both aware of the limitations of the blogosphere and understand the personalities of the individuals who administrate and read blogs. For publishers and authors looking to promote their titles with this method, the research and discussions currently taking place have drawn the following conclusions about effective blog tours:

- Publishers should aim to develop relationships with bloggers. As Nelson points out in her article, “Blogs are especially valuable to book publishers because they are as varied and specialized as books” (11). But publicists need to be realistic about the amount of time a blogger is willing and able to put into a title, usually for free. This means planning ahead of time, being professional, and not repeatedly asking that the blogger check out upcoming titles. The blogger should genuinely enjoy the genre and want to read the title in order for content to remain fresh and appealing to audiences. Relationships ensure that bloggers are reading books they actually want to read, which can lead to more positive reviews (“Frequently Asked Questions”).
- The focus of guest blog posts shouldn’t be on the book, but the author. This

inherently makes blogs the wrong space for authors who don't fit the audience and aren't open to getting personal. Blog readers don't want to be sold something, but if they enjoy an author's voice and what he or she has to say, then they will seek out more of their work.

- If giveaways are a component of the blog tour, make them quick and painless. There shouldn't be any sign-up forms, only the press of a button. Readers should not have to follow the tour from start to finish in order to receive the prize. This will likely turn them off rather than encourage them to participate.
- Blog tours must be drawn out, spanning weeks if not months. Like any good story, readers need a chance to breathe between sittings. Authors need to think of their book's promotional horizon as being endless. While features in print may be less likely after publication, excerpts, interviews, and other forms of digital publicity can be achieved. Publicists suggest establishing relationships with "big mouths," or high-profile authors and celebrity bloggers because "unlike magazine editors, these influencers aren't tied to an editorial calendar; your book could be many months out of the gate before the right person learns about it and shares it on his or her blog" (Blumenfeld and Turetsky). If the tour is to be shared on social media, make sure it isn't the *only* thing shared on social media. Readers should never feel spammed by an author or publisher promoting a title. The sharing should feel natural and the content worthwhile for the reader.
- Perhaps, most importantly, creativity is a vital component of successful blog tours. In 2014, Bianca Turetsky, author of *The Time Traveling Fashionista*, and her publicist, Lucinda Blumenfeld, the owner of Lucinda Literary, a literary and publicity agency, wrote a piece called "Four Tips For Successful Book Promotion" for *Publisher's Weekly*. According to Blumenfeld, "For Bianca's book launch, a series about a

vintage-obsessed 12-year-old girl who's carried away to different historical eras, we found immense support from YA and style bloggers, who hosted Bianca on a blog tour and posted images of her book on Instagram." Not all blogs that promote books are literary-based. Turetsky and Blumenfeld went to adult fashion outlets for promotion—successfully—when other types of reviews proved difficult to find. Industry experts like Jeff Gomez also stress importance on creativity, advising, "It's better to send books to a variety of bloggers and communities. And although it's best to align books with bloggers' tastes, it may be worth sending really fantastic books to influential bloggers regardless of their interests." Gomez goes on to write, "This type of marketing works best for non-fiction books with a focused topic. Books about politics or other ideas that are already blogged about often are ideal." Gomez may be on to something there, considering that 11 percent of bloggers cite politics and government (second to the 37 percent who cite "my life and experiences") as the subject of their blogs (Fox and Lenhart).

Conclusion

Referencing the disappearance of space devoted to traditional book reviews and coverage, Nelson states in her 2006 article, "Many books go unnoticed, and readers don't even know what they are missing. Several book blogs were launched in reaction to the shrinking coverage in traditional media...much of the conversation about books has moved online" (12). This is even truer now, with more brick-and-mortar bookstores closing each day. Literary blogs help stimulate book discussions and coverage, but the ability to measure and quantify the effectiveness of blog tours remains difficult. Over the long term, blog tours, as one aspect of an overall marketing and publicity strategy, can generate more connections with readers and increase Search Engine Optimization for an author. However, these results

come with stipulations and do not always lead to an increase in sales—let alone large ones. Rather than having the effect of promoting an author's individual title, they may lead to loyal fans over the course of an author's career. For authors, this makes blog tours an effective strategy for marketing themselves. Blogs are still, after all, what they always have been—personal. For publishers, this means that relationships with bloggers must be rethought. Blogs allow authors and publishers to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and connect directly with their readers, but blog posts only help readers discover your book—it's up to authors and publishers to make sure they want to take them home.

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