

April 19, 2004

Many Started Web Logs for Fun, but Bloggers Need Money, Too

By JULIE FLAHERTY

CAMBRIDGE, Mass., April 18 - "This is my claim to fame," Ned Batchelder said as he held up a square of off-white paper. It all began on his Web log, or blog, last June, when he described how to make cube-shaped business cards.

While not a particularly fascinating bit of origami, the trick has become a tiny source of income. Thanks to references and links to the card cubes on other Web logs, the visitors to that page of his blog bring him a day in ad revenue.

The on-line search engine Google, which places the classified-style ads on his blog, pays Mr. Batchelder time someone clicks on one.

"I didn't get into this to make money," said Mr. Batchelder, a blogger from Brookline, Mass., whose business card cube is posted at www.nedbatchelder.com/text/cardcube.html.

That was a refrain of most of the bloggers at Bloggercon II, a conference sponsored on Saturday by Harvard School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. But a hot topic was whether blogging would ever become a major source of income for large numbers of people.

The blog watchers agreed that the vast majority of the estimated 2.1 million Web logs out there today would not even attempt to make money. But even now there are exceptions, like AndrewSullivan.com, DailyKos.com, PaidContent.org, and bloggers speak of them with reverence because of their profitability.

"We all love doing this, and we want to be able to support ourselves doing it and make it work," said Jeff Jarvis, a journalist, blogger and president of Advance.net, an Internet strategy company.

Blogs, which are frequented by only about 10 percent of people who use the Internet, are personal online spaces where individuals can publish their thoughts on their businesses, their politics, their families or anything else (often everything) they please.

In keeping with that spirit, the meeting was appropriately ad hoc, with no expert panels or keynote speaker participants - whether they had been posting for three weeks or five years - took turns voicing their opinions, snapping digital photos, recording videos, and, of course, blogging on their laptops through it all.

Mr. Jarvis, who led a discussion on blogging as a business, has been watching all the ways that bloggers have managed to bring in a buck. Some bloggers have made money by selling books, T-shirts or CD's on their own. Some have tried selling access to individual articles or content through micropayments (99 cents for a page, for example). A very few, like Andrew Sullivan, have made tens of thousands of dollars simply by asking for donations from loyal readers.

But the most talked about route to profit was selling advertisements that pay by the month or by the number of blog visits. Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net), one of the most popular blogs on the Web with its musings by four freelance writers, is considering adding sponsors as a way to offset its server fees of about \$1,000 a month.

But observers wonder how advertising - the lifeblood of mainstream newspapers and magazines - will affect the grass-roots-sensibility of Boing Boing and other blogs.

"It all comes down to personal integrity," Mr. Jarvis said. "If you trust and like and read Boing Boing because you trust and like and read it, there is no reason you wouldn't continue to read them because someone is paying for their server."

Bloggers, like Stowe Boyd, who posts at www.corante.com/getreal/, have no problem reviewing products with one hand and soliciting sponsors with the other. Mr. Boyd, who came to the conference from Reston, Va., makes most of his income as a consultant on collaborative technologies, but credits his blog with about \$3,000 in advertising revenue each month. "They can't get me to turn around and promote their product," he said. "It's all my agenda."

Before advertisers will flock to blogs, Mr. Jarvis said, bloggers will need to develop data on who is visiting their site, and how often. "I don't want to blow up a bubble here and say this is going to be huge," Mr. Jarvis said. "The beauty of it is it is small and it's in the hands of the people."

Henry Copeland, founder of BlogAds, a service that provides classified advertising for Web logs, is even more confident. He predicted that blogs that are making \$5,000 a month will be making five or six times that a year from now. Soon, advertisers will be able to say "I want to buy ads on 25 different Web logs in Southern California written by women who drive humvees," and have the perfect audience at their fingertips, he said.

Many participants said that their Web logs had made them money indirectly, through promoting their businesses. Some credit blogs with helping to increase their consulting work. Some say blogs have helped lead to book deals, freelance writing jobs or lecture tours.

J. Craig Williams, a lawyer in Newport Beach, Calif., began his Web log, MayItPleaseTheCourt.net, in August. He said his postings, which focus on his particular area of law, have brought him hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of legal business.

But talk of money leaves a bad taste in the mouth of some bloggers. Some participants were far more interested in talking about the role of blogging in politics and religion. A heated discussion arose over whether blogging is journalism. And many wondered if there is room for little-known blogs ever to make the 'A' list.