

Rise of the bloggers

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Every April, in the verdant grounds of an angular Art Deco villa not far from Saint Tropez, the French fashion pack gathers to determine the future of the industry. The focus of the event is a series of catwalk shows – held in a tent down on the beach – featuring the work of young designers from fashion schools around the world. In between shows, the hopefuls install themselves in makeshift ateliers and share their vision with buyers, reporters and, most importantly, a judging panel that will later award the festival Grand Prix. Alongside the fashion competition is a parallel category for photographers. The event also embraces seminars, networking – and some pretty fabulous parties.

The Hyères International Festival of Fashion and Photography used to be a rarefied, exclusive event, attended only by the happy few who worked in the industry, wrote for the right magazines, or knew the right people. In recent years, though, a new tribe has been spotted stalking across the villa’s immaculately barbered lawns, staking out the best places at the shows and helping themselves to finger food and champagne. They are the fashion bloggers, and they are assailing the elitist world of glossy magazines.

One of them is British blogger Susanna Lau, whose blog Style Bubble attracts around 35,000 visitors a day. A minor celebrity among UK fashion fans, Lau occasionally gets spotted when she’s out shopping. This popularity with everyday consumers is what makes blogs increasingly attractive to brands – and subsequently gains bloggers access to fashion events.

Not that it was Lau’s goal when she started out. She’s always considered fashion a hobby, and although she did ‘a bit of styling for student magazines’ at university, she actually studied history. Now, however, she finds herself being approached by fashion brands for styling and consultancy

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advice. Not bad for somebody who only started blogging in March 2006. ‘I was partly inspired by leading fashion blogs like Fashionologie and A Shaded View on Fashion [by Paris-based commentator Diane Pernet],’ she explains. ‘And I was always chatting with other fashion fanatics on forums like Fashion Spot. I wanted to express myself, and I thought a blog would be a much easier platform than a website. My idea was to get back to the basics of blogging, which is to express a personal viewpoint. Some blogs have begun to approach fashion in a rather cold way, with newsy posts about dresses you can’t afford. But I want to raise issues and provoke debate.’

Their provocative, often irreverent, approach to fashion is exactly what made blogs seem daunting to big brands, which were used to the criticism-free environment of the glossies. But readers quickly realized that blogs were an alternative, refreshing source of news and opinion. And smaller designers saw a promotional opportunity: after all, you can’t dismiss 35,000 visitors a day. ‘As we all know, glossy magazines devote an extremely limited amount of space to designers that don’t have an advertising budget,’ says Lau. ‘On the other hand, I’ll enthusiastically support and promote a designer whose work I find interesting.’

In addition, hyperactive bloggers are arguably more in sync with the changeable spirit of fashion than the traditional glossies. Fashion magazines are planned up to three months in advance – a blogger can report on a show 10 minutes after the designer has left the runway.

Blogs and the press

The organizers of catwalk shows in London, New York, Paris and Milan are now used to dealing with an ever-expanding community of bloggers. But their gradual acceptance by the fashion community has also eaten into the bloggers’ independent status. Well-known fashion bloggers are now sent gifts, invited to launch parties and taken on press junkets just like glossy magazine journalists.

Some have crossed to the other side on a more professional basis. Lau is a freelance fashion journalist for *Elle* UK, *Pop*, *Dazed & Confused* and *The Observer*. Another popular blogger, The Sartorialist – Scott Schuman, who wowed the fashion crowd with his razor-sharp street photography and pithy commentaries – was given his own column in the US edition of *GQ*, after stints taking photographs for the Condé Nast website Style.com (a spot

later filled by the influential blogger Tommy Ton of Jak & Jil). 'I could see from the statistics on the site that they were watching me for a while,' says Schuman, who started his photo-blog in September 2005. 'I think what they noticed was consistency: I wasn't shooting someone with good taste one day and bad taste the next. They also noticed an eye for detail.'

Schuman had an advantage in that he'd already worked in the fashion business for 15 years, including running a showroom for designers. The blog sprang out of his observation that a certain kind of well-dressed male was not represented in men's fashion magazines. 'I'd be out on the streets of New York and I'd see these ordinary guys who nonetheless had a very distinct sense of style. Some of them were quirky; others were wearing beautiful Italian suits. I thought other guys would be inspired by them, but you never saw pictures of them anywhere.'

He initially toyed with the idea of setting up a website, but it seemed overly complicated, as well as requiring a whole team of people. 'It was only when I found out about blogging that the whole thing clicked. This was a platform that was easy to set up, virtually free, and enabled me to express my ideas.' Less than a year after his blog had gone online, Scott got a call from Style.com, which dispatched him to Milan to take pictures of the guys attending, or merely hanging around, the men's fashion shows. That's when the media really began to notice him, he says. 'I was dressed stylishly, so I didn't look like just another photographer. I didn't blend in. I looked more like a fashion editor with a camera. Before long, people asked me what I was up to, and we got talking. Then one time I was at a Prada show and [GQ editor] Jim Nelson called me over.'

As the site evolved, The Sartorialist began to take photos of women as well as men. This broad appeal – combined with media coverage – drove his site's figures up to 45,000 visitors a day. With Condé Nast handling his ad sales, he began to reap genuine income from the blog. He also signed a book deal with Phaidon, and the James Danziger gallery in New York staged an exhibition of his work. Schuman admits that his rapid ascent has left him slightly breathless. 'I could never have imagined that things would move this fast. To use an English expression, I'm chuffed.'

But he doesn't believe that blogs will replace magazines as the most influential fashion media. 'It's a totally different thing. My photos are a slice of life, while a magazine makes you daydream in another way. But I do think blogs are a great source of talent for the mainstream media. And at the same time, the people who run blogs have a certain amount of power. A blogger who is recruited by a newspaper can maybe negotiate a better contract

because they have an audience of thousands of people that they're bringing with them.' The bloggers who have been adopted by the mainstream fashion press did not ape it, or fantasize about being part of it, but set out to express their own unique visions. Fashion has a vampire-like lust for novelty.

This new collusion between the outlying world of the blogs and the fashion establishment is generally perceived as a good thing – injecting a much needed breath of fresh air into the industry. In New York, it helps harassed PRs ensure that fashion shows will be packed out, despite an over-supply of shows and an over-stretched press corps. But it can also create some abrasive moments. In early 2007, media news website Mediabistro reported on a fashion show encounter between blogger Julie Fredrickson – of the site Coutorture – and *Vogue* supremo Anna Wintour. Spotting Wintour 'minding her own front-row business', Fredrickson gamely began to interview the powerful editor. Much to her credit, Wintour politely began to answer the questions – until her publicist appeared and sent the blogger packing. ('Bloggers in tents: fashion warms to new media', 6 February 2007.)

In February 2012, professional stylist Mary Fellowes took exception to the caravan of bloggers that now follows the fashion pack from city to city. On a blog, ironically – thegoodwebguide.co.uk – she wrote: 'The "bloggerazzi" have turned fashion week into an ugly circus of attention seeking wannabes, feeding and fuelling the egos of its subjects with flashbulbs for sustenance... An army of apparent nobodies has swelled in numbers, taking over the front line, making entering into a show like running the gauntlet. More often than not clad in outlandish and forced looking outfits, they have adopted the customs of the paparazzi but sadly they have none of the clout.'

For readers – and, of course, for the bloggers themselves – this new media is another stage in the democratization of the fashion industry, enabling them to pierce the façade of a notoriously elitist business. Even the backstage of catwalk shows is no longer out of bounds to the general public, thanks to blogs like the one begun by Anina, a model. Using her mobile phone, she started snapping backstage scenes, parties and images from her travels and posting them on her blog with breezy commentaries. She went on to create 360 Fashion, a network of blogs from around the fashion industry.

'I blog using my mobile about a hundred times a day because, in my work, I'm absolutely not anywhere near a computer,' she told *Wired* magazine. 'Fashion is a mystery to many people. Now, like voyeurs, they can see what's happening in the industry.' Hardly conforming to the clichéd image of the fashion model, Anina learned how to write computer code at school.

‘I like to see how systems work... I’m hacking fashion, I suppose.’ (‘Le chic shall inherit les blogs’, 6 December 2005.)

Inevitably, the rise of blogs inspired mainstream media to start their own. Among the most respected establishment bloggers is Cathy Horyn of *The New York Times*. Horyn noted the rising power of blogs back in 2005, when she wrote: ‘Although fashion, like politics, is still an insider’s game, with its own addicts and agenda-setting editors, nothing, it seems, can compete with the authentic judgement of bloggers and web viewers.’ (‘The Paris 6’, 28 April 2005.)

Forget ‘authentic’: a positive judgement is what brands are hoping for when they dispatch a freebie to a blogger – or summon them to an exclusive launch event. Some bloggers are easily seduced. Others, though, are determined to remain outspoken and untarnished. ‘I still think my first duty is to my readers,’ says Susanna Lau of Style Bubble. ‘I was recently invited on a trip to Paris by Chanel, to cover the launch of their latest advertising campaign, but in my posts I was absolutely transparent about what the deal was. I certainly won’t accept money from brands for posts, which I know some bloggers do. And although I receive at least 30 e-mails a day asking me to promote some product or another, that’s not what I’m here for.’

Not all bloggers – or advertisers – share her view. While it’s difficult to unearth concrete figures, anecdotal evidence suggests that a handful of bloggers are making a great deal of money out of advertising. Others have used their blogs to supercharge their careers. Bloggers like Schuman and his partner Garance Doré, whose eponymous blog is one of the most popular on the web, have evolved into brands in their own right, hiring themselves out for advertising shoots and consulting. Their success has made them role models for a new generation.

Blogging as a business

‘I decided from the start that I didn’t want advertising on my blog,’ says James Bort, a French blogger and photographer who has worked on a freelance basis for a number of prestigious brands, ‘so if I wanted to earn a living through it, I had to find another economic model. The solution was to turn it into a portfolio for my work.’

A former art student, Bort had also worked in advertising before launching his blog. Every blog needs an angle, and his would explore the backstage of luxury: the ateliers and workshops where premium products are created;

or the creative chaos behind the scenes of runway shows. After that, it was a case of calling the brands and asking permission. Many accepted. Occasional photography assignments for *Madame Figaro* provided further access. He was also aided by the brands themselves. ‘They’d send me press releases or advertising proposals, and I’d call them up and say: “I’m not interested in that, but what if I came and photographed your atelier, or the backstage of your show, and placed the images exclusively on my site?”’

These days, brands approach Bort for paid projects. He’s worked with Baccarat, Lanvin, Patek Philippe, Van Cleef and Arpels, Christian Dior and Jean-Paul Gaultier, among others. The relationship with Gaultier is a good illustration of the advantages of a blog. ‘I was invited with a group of other bloggers to an event organized by the brand, and I took a quick picture of Jean-Paul Gaultier, which I posted on the site. The brand liked it so much they contacted me and bought the rights to use it internationally.’

Similarly, Bort met Lanvin designer Alber Elbaz during a shoot for *Madame Figaro*, and has since been hired as a photographer by the brand on numerous occasions. Since then, he’s progressed to making short films for Baccarat and even the telecoms brand Orange. ‘The brands give me room to experiment because working with me has certain advantages. For a start, I’m much cheaper than a conventional advertising agency. But there’s also the fact that I’m more than just a photographer or a director. When the project is done I distribute the content via social networks and the blog. So I’m a creator, a producer and a distributor, in one affordable package.’

Other bloggers have professionalized by becoming part of branded networks run by web media companies. These online magazines don’t create, they curate. Typical of these is Glam Media, whose network of sites is led by Glam.com, an aggregation of fashion, beauty and lifestyle blogs. Officially launched during New York fashion week in September 2006, just over a year later its staff had swelled from 25 to 100. By the beginning of the next decade the San Francisco-based Glam Media employed around 500 people worldwide, not to mention 4,000 authors. Together with its male-oriented site Brash.com and its health and beauty arm Bliss.com, it claims an audience of 88 million viewers every month in the United States alone, based on figures from ComScore. It acquired the social networking site Ning in 2011, giving it an additional distribution platform as well as extra content, and advertising and subscription revenue.

Glam.com founder Samir Arora noted that many bloggers were evolving into independent publishers: their blogs had become full-time occupations. And yet they were unable to make a decent living out of their work. Glam

allows them to do this by placing their blogs on its network and splitting advertising revenue 50/50, based on page impressions. It also works with the bloggers to create microsites and promotional content for brands. All this has changed the lives of many of the site's 'indie publishers'.

'Arora says that three of Glam's content curators have earned over \$1 million in residuals this year – a good year for a writer or editor in any medium. With its focus on women aged 18–49, Glam has forged what Arora called a "very deep connection between the content and the advertiser". Ads appear in context from the 1,000 brands from Gucci to Prada to Neiman Marcus throughout its network.' ('Glam Media forges a global empire based on women', 7x7.com, 13 December 2011.)

The first millionaire bloggers have arrived.

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