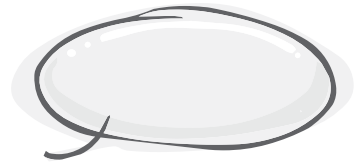# Bloggers and webcomic artists: Careers in online creativity

The expansion of the Internet has created many new opportunities for people to share their talents. Many people share just for fun—but some do it for fun and money.

Online, these artists can reach a global audience. The rapid growth of online media excites many people working in the field. "There are a billion new opportunities that weren't there 5 years ago," says Greg Wyshynski, editor of hockey blog *Puck Daddy.*

This article describes careers for digital media workers. The first section focuses on two online occupations: bloggers and webcomic artists. The second section discusses why bloggers and webcomic artists enjoy their work and some of the challenges that they face. A final section suggests sources for more information. And the box on page 20 provides tips for developing your own blog or webcomic.

Jobs in digital media

The growth of the Internet and the availability of simple Web publishing tools have made it easy to share content online. Many people create websites as a hobby or as a way to share news with family and friends. Artists— including photographers, writers, filmmakers, and musicians—put their work online in the hopes of attracting attention and building a following. These artists enjoy sharing their creations with people around the world.

Some artists, however, are able to make a living creating content for their websites. Workers in the occupations covered in this article, bloggers and webcomic artists, produce online content as their primary source of revenue. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has no employment or wage data for bloggers or webcomic artists. Their wages vary significantly depending on their employer and the size of their audience.

Bloggers

Bloggers are writers who regularly post content on a Web log, or blog. These blog posts can be of any length and on any topic.

Some bloggers post many times a day; others post less frequently. In their posts, bloggers occasionally use other media and content that aren't possible in print. Cooking blogs might include instructional videos of cooking techniques, for example, or news blogs provide interactive maps. Bloggers can be self-employed, employed by print media or other companies, or work as contractors.

Depending on their interests, self-employed bloggers write on a number of topics, such as offering financial advice or reviewing restaurants. They have complete creative control over their own content and set their own schedules. Most self-employed bloggers make money through advertising on their websites. The amount of money they make from ads depends on the number of times people visit their website, called traffic. As traffic increases, advertisers pay bloggers more. Well-known bloggers may also make money through sponsorships, book or product sales, and speaking fees.

When employed by traditional print media companies, such as newspapers and magazines, bloggers may write for both print and online editions. For example, Brier Dudley, technology blogger for *The Seattle Times*, writes a weekly column in addition to his regular blog entries. According to Dudley, the tone of his blog differs from that of his column. "Blog items tend to be more conversational and casual," he says.

Bloggers who work for newspapers or magazines are more like traditional journalists than are self-employed bloggers. News bloggers receive guidance from editors who review their posts. And like traditional journalists, news bloggers need to be ready to write whenever news occurs. Many readers turn to the Internet for breaking news, so bloggers often race to be the first to post news. "You're like a doctor on call at all times," says Wyshynski. "You have to be on the story first."

Some bloggers work on a contract basis, not as employees of news media companies. These contractors usually write for online news websites that publish posts from many bloggers. Like news bloggers, these

Drew Liming

Drew Liming is an economist. He worked in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS, at the time he wrote this article.

There are no formal education requirements for self-employed bloggers. However, self-employed bloggers are usually experts in the field they blog about. They previously may have worked in a job related to their blog's topic. For example, a professional blogger who runs a home decorating blog may have experience with many different decorating or remodeling techniques.

Bloggers who are self-employed or who work with a small staff usually need experience with multimedia tools. Newspapers may have photographers and video editors on staff, but many bloggers lack these resources and produce the photos and videos themselves. "A lot of online media isn't just about being talented as a writer or a journalist," says Wyshynski. "You might have to shoot and edit your own video and audio."
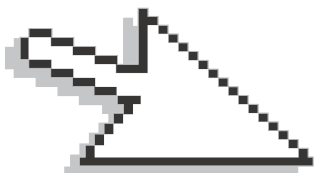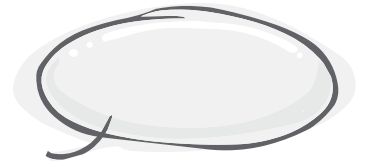
Webcomic artists

Although most comic artists work for newspaper syndicates or comic book companies, webcomic artists post their strips for readers online. Some webcomic artists post new strips daily; others post less frequently.

Creating a widely read webcomic requires more than excellent artwork. Webcomic artists must also write scripts for their strips before they begin drawing. In some webcomics, called one-shots, each strip is a self-contained story. Other webcomics are serials, which have long-running plots and regularly occurring characters.

For webcomic artists, developing a good script can be a quick or lengthy process. Sometimes, inspiration strikes early in the creative process, and they get an idea for a script immediately. Other times, webcomic artisis may spend hours—or more—struggling to craft a script that their audiences will enjoy.

Webcomic artists may turn to outside influences for inspiration when they're having difficulty writing a script. For example, Tim Buckley, artist of *Ctrl + Alt + Del*, frequently uses video game humor in his comic. To find ideas, Buckley researches what new games are scheduled to be released and what issues are

contractors submit their posts to editors for review. They are usually paid per post, similar to freelance reporters. Many contract bloggers write for several different sites to increase their income. They may also earn bonuses for writing posts that attract particularly high traffic.

Skills and training. As professional writers, bloggers must be excellent communicators and need to understand what content most appeals to their audiences. Bloggers also have to be disciplined to produce high-quality research and writing, while trying to meet deadlines or to post breaking news.

Bloggers employed by newspapers usually have a journalism degree or previous newspaper experience. Some contract bloggers have journalism degrees, but it is not a requirement. Like freelance journalists, contract blogger's posts are judged on their own merit.

of interest to the gaming community. He also draws inspiration from his personal life. "I've gotten many ideas from interactions with my friends and family," he says.

After they've written the script for a strip, webcomic artists begin drawing. All artists have their own style. Some draw highly detailed characters and landscapes; others use a minimalist style. Many webcomics are in full color, but some artists prefer to work in black and white. Depending on the complexity of the artwork, drawing a strip may take anywhere from a few minutes to many hours.

Most webcomics are available online at no cost, so comic artists have to find alternative sources of revenue. Like bloggers, many webcomics make money through advertisements. Webcomic artists also earn money from selling products, such as t-shirts and compilation books of their comics, to fans.

When they're not planning or drawing comic strips, webcomic artists are frequently creating new products to sell to fans. According to Jeph Jacques, artist of *Questionable Content*, coming up with good products can be a challenge. "Coming up with a t-shirt design is like making a comic," he says. "It can be quick, but it usually takes a long time."

Webcomic artists are able to communicate directly with readers, which allows them to understand which products and scripts appeal most to their audience. Many webcomic artists spend part of their day replying to email from fans. Some webcomics also have message boards that allow artists to communicate with their fans. To share information with readers, webcomic artists sometimes write personal blogs on their websites.

Many webcomic artists also connect with readers by meeting them at conventions. Artists may travel to conventions to speak on panels and interact with fans and peers. Many artists also bring their products to conventions, where they can sell their merchandise directly.

Skills and training. Not all webcomic artists are formally trained. In fact, many are self-taught and have refined their artwork through years of practice. The artwork of different webcomics varies widely, and practice is essential for each artist to develop a unique style.

Excellent artwork alone does not ensure success as a webcomic artist; artists also must write scripts that appeal to their audience. To improve their scripts, many artists practice writing dialogue and developing characters.

Because each webcomic operates as his or her own small business, operating it successfully also requires skill in business and math. These skills help artists evaluate companies to find the right manufacturer for their products, to price merchandise, and to complete tax forms for their small businesses.

Rewards and challenges

Sharing content online is often rewarding. Bloggers and webcomic artists can gain a global audience for their work, and they frequently develop close relationships with their fans. Unlike traditional media, digital media workers who post online can communicate directly with readers from all over the world. "You can get feedback instantly," says Dudley. "And you're having a conversation with people everywhere."
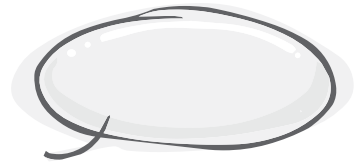
Self-employed bloggers and webcomic artists enjoy having control over their work and making their own decisions. They set their own schedules and write or draw without supervision. "I have the freedom to work and to write stories and jokes that entertain me," says Buckley.

But establishing a popular blog or webcomic is difficult. New blogs and webcomics face competition from an immense crowd of previously existing sites. With so many competitors, new sites struggle to stand out. Even the best blog or webcomic may never be read by an audience large enough to make it profitable.

Blogs and webcomics that are able to attract a following usually have to wait years before they're financially stable. Bloggers and webcomic artists frequently develop and maintain their websites as side projects while working full time in another job. If
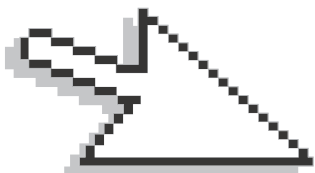
the website becomes profitable, then it might turn into a full-time job. But building a large audience usually takes a while. "You have to be willing to be poor," warns Jacques. "There aren't any instant millions."

Bloggers and webcomic artists constantly search for ways to monetize the work they put online. Even online advertising, the most common way to make money, isn't a guaranteed source of revenue anymore. To view blog and webcomics, many people now use Rich Site Summary (RSS) feeds to see updates from their favorite websites all in one place. RSS feeds frequently remove advertisements from posts and don't count towards a webpage's traffic totals. This decreased traffic reduces the amount of money bloggers and webcomic artists make from advertisers. In response to the increasing use of RSS feeds, bloggers and webcomic artists are searching for new ways to make money while continuing to put their content online for free.

Despite these challenges, many bloggers and webcomic artists are passionate about sharing their work directly with readers. "Even if I couldn't make the living I do," says Buckley, "I'd still want to do this because I enjoy it so much."

For more information

To learn more about writing and artistic occupations, as well as hundreds of others, check the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (*OOH*), online at **www.bls.gov/ooh**. The *OOH* does not have information specific to bloggers and webcomic artists, but it does include profiles of similar occupations, such as writers, journalists, and fine artists.

In addition, an article about cartoonists appeared in the fall 2008 *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*. It is available online at **www. bls.gov/ooq/2008/fall/yawhat.htm**.

Because the occupations in this article are relatively new, there are no established associations for bloggers or webcomic artists. However, some professional bloggers and webcomic artists have posted advice for aspiring beginners. To find this information, search online for "how to become a blogger" or "how to become a webcomic artist." ∞Q