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NEW KIDS ON THE BLOG

The black bloggers who are leading the the online revolution

By Elizabeth Pears

IT IS hard to imagine life today without the internet. Back in the day, when you went out to meet friends for dinner, nobody 'checked you in' on Facebook before you had the time to take your coat off. Nor were pictures of your first course posted on Instagram.

They were simpler and more private times all-round.

But the digital revolution has brought with it other benefits. Thanks to social media and sites like Twitter, YouTube, Wordpress, Blogspot and Tumblr – there is more information at your fingertips than ever.

The dissemination of information is no longer in the hands of a privileged few. Now anyone with something to say and access to an internet connection can make their mark.

The internet has given rise to a new wave of creative types who are using online tools to make their voices heard, filling gaps in the market overlooked or not even understood by mainstream media.

Some of the most popular online communities centre on issues around the so-called natural hair movement, underground music scenes, beauty blogs for African and Caribbean women and general themes of balancing cultural identities and the battle of the sexes.

POPULARITY

Though blogs – a portmanteau of 'web logs' – have been around since the late Nineties, it is only over the past few years that their popularity has exploded.

In the US, it is believed that 57 million adults read blogs on a regular basis.

Black and ethnic minority bloggers make up at least 40 per cent of the entire community.

Not as much is known about the UK blogging scene, and even far less is known about blogs written by those of African and

Caribbean heritage.

Academic Deborah Gabriel, who specialises in journalism and media, is hoping to put that right.

In 2011, she founded the website Black Bloggers UK Network as a platform for the community and is now undertaking a PhD research project at the University of Salford on African Caribbean bloggers in the UK.

It will be the first study of its kind in the UK. Gabriel said she hoped the explorative study based on the experiences of bloggers would fill an academic gap.

She told *The Voice*: "I'm looking at why they blog; what they blog about; what gratification they get from blogging and whether their blogs address issues of representation in the mainstream media. As we know, there's a history of people of African and Caribbean heritage being excluded or misrepresented."

In 2012, it was estimated that there were more than 77 million Tumblr and 56.5 million

Wordpress blogs in existence.

What has become clear from her research, explained the former journalist and author, was that the vast majority of bloggers wanted to have their voices heard in the public domain or were simply passionate about something that they couldn't read elsewhere.

Marsha Goshie Oakes founded her blog *Soul Culture* in 2007 when she was in second year of university. It has since grown into a successful international online magazine which she runs full-time with business partner Eddie Smith who previously worked at Def Jam.

The site – nominated for a Soul Train Award in 2010 – caters to culture-savvy music lovers and offers the latest news about music, in-depth features and interviews.

PASSION

"I think part of our appeal is that even though we have transitioned into a business, that wasn't necessarily what motivated me to start the blog," said Goshie Oakes.

"Firstly, I wanted to write. And I wasn't just interested in music; I was interested in the history of music and looking at things like the impact of the Civil Rights movement on soul music. There wasn't one place that did all that so I decided to create it myself."

Oakes said with blogging or self-publishing comes a certain degree of freedom to write from an honest place rather than writing simply to attract web hits.

Gabriel said that was the key ingredient of any successful blog.

She said: "In the beginning, the news media were highly critical of bloggers and making comparisons to professional journalists until they came to understand that the personalised aspect is what attracts readers to blogs."

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