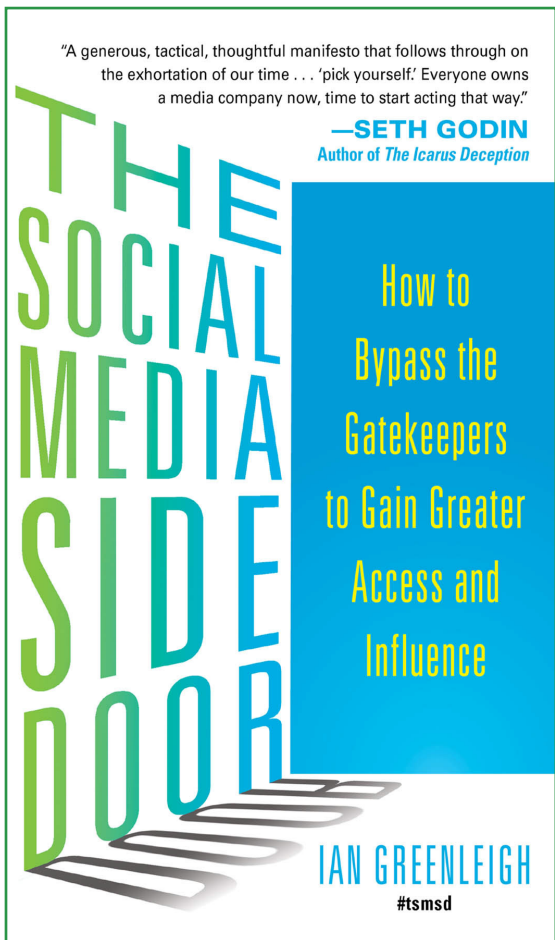




# BOOK EXCERPT



## The Social Media Side Door

HOW TO BYPASS THE GATEKEEPERS TO GAIN GREATER ACCESS AND INFLUENCE

Ian Greenleigh

Skip the line at the front door! Learn to detect the hidden social media side doors that will give you instant, privileged access to the top influencers and decision-makers in your industry.

Social media strategist Ian Greenleigh reveals the best ways to earn the attention of influential people and organizations using social media channels—to forge valuable relationships, create business opportunities, raise your thought leader profile, or land the perfect job.

Learn more about Ian and his book:  
<http://daretocomment.com/the-social-side-door/>

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Excerpt from *The Social Media Side Door* Learn more at <http://daretocomment.com/the-social-side-door/>

# Gatekeeping and Access

## The First 3,000 Telephones

*Mr. Watson, come here! I want to see you!*

—**ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL,**  
March 10, 1876 (the world's first phone call)

*inviting coworkers*

—**JACK DORSEY,**  
March 21, 2006 (the world's first tweet)<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after a new communications medium arrives, side doors of access are created by the confluence of low adoption and technological immaturity. These side doors do not last forever. The excitement and the mutual opportunity that initially pass through them eventually become costly—and sometimes a liability. The fortunate few who discover these doors get in early and make out like bandits before the rest of the world finds out. Side doors soon become crowded and unreliable, while the people who originally left them open see no choice but to seal them against the oncoming crowds.

Social media has created an incredible array of side doors, and all of them remain open—if you know where to look. Right now, social media is the telephone before there were secretaries and voice mail. It’s e-mail before spam and autoreplies. History tells us that this degree of access is not sustainable, and side doors don’t stay open. Sometime soon, we’ll be telling “remember-when” stories. It’s up to you: do you want to be the storyteller, recalling how good the social media side doors were for you, or do you want to be the audience, wishing you had known—and acted?

One year after Bell invented the telephone, the world had 3,000 working telephones.<sup>2</sup> Think about the calls placed to and from those first 3,000 telephones, the excitement with which they were placed and received, and the elite circle that one instantly entered just by placing one of them. A person could connect with those who were all but unreachable by other means, an exclusive channel of access that opened up for these early adopters alone—a technological side door.

The normal rules of polite society would, of course, apply to early telephone communication—no foul language, no harassment or violations of privacy. But outside these limitations, one would have free rein to explore a brand-new communications channel. The voices on the other end were no doubt tinged with the excitement of early adoption. Most calls were between familiar parties, and the telephone was a new way for existing contacts to connect. For the most part, it helped maintain and build relationships, not start them.

## Doubters, Evangelists, and Opportunists

There were certainly a lot of doubters of the telephone’s potential. Among them was Western Union, which dismissed the technology in an 1876 internal memo: “The telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”<sup>3</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, there were early evangelists, who trumpeted the telephone’s

invention without much evidence of its eventual success—some of history’s lucky guessers. In between the two extremes were the early adopters, who focused on the telephone’s utility at the time and stayed out of the predictions business.

This is where we find the opportunists throughout history. They’re busy putting the technology of the day to work for them. Whoever made the world’s first sales call was among this group. I imagine this person taking a deep breath as the operator connected him to his intended prospect. The recipient answers, expecting a familiar voice, only to find a stranger on the other end. An exchange of greetings and then the moment of truth. Does the prospect hang up or cut the conversation short? Or does the prospect sit and listen to what the stranger has to say? I suspect it’s the latter. The recipient has no concept of phone solicitation. It probably hasn’t yet dawned on the listener that this new network could even be used to conduct business between people or firms. To the prospect, the person on the other end of the call is not a nuisance but a member of a limited circle in which having access to a connected telephone is the sole qualification. And people do business with those in their circle, even if the circle was entered through a side door.

When the telephone enters mass production and prices drop, and as a national telephone network is built, the circle widens. The exclusive privileges of circle membership wither away, and the cost of being accessed shifts in a way that repeats itself each time a successful new communications technology climbs the adoption curve. The party seeking access is able to find it more cheaply and easily than ever before. The party being accessed begins to find this access problematic, and the side door starts to swing shut.

## Exclusive No More

It isn’t the work of an elite cabal with grand designs on limiting access; instead it’s a gradual, decentralized process that begins

whenever this access becomes problematic in the eyes of those granting it. Consider what happens next. New Haven, Connecticut, receives the first phone book in 1878, which contains fewer than 50 listings.<sup>4</sup> In 1894, Bell's patents expire, allowing new companies to enter the telephone production business.<sup>5</sup> Six years later, in 1900, 1.35 million telephone lines can be found in the United States, and Americans are making nearly 8 million calls per day.<sup>6</sup> Before sales calls were established, marketers were using phone books to locate the most qualified prospects for mailers. JNP Cramer, president of Multi-Mailing Co., tells *Printer's Ink* in 1903, "The rural telephone sorts out the influential classes in every community, and lists of names made up from telephones are excellent for high-class propositions."<sup>7</sup> In 1935, Willy Müller invents the first automatic answering machine.<sup>8</sup> At some point along the way, secretaries begin to screen calls. Unlisted numbers are offered to those who cannot be bothered. The circle of access expands rapidly with the rise of telephone use, and what was once a proud, exclusive club becomes a free-for-all.

## Understanding the Gatekeepers

Trailing not far behind the introduction of a successful new communications technology are the human and technological gatekeepers. Human gatekeepers include receptionists, executive assistants, recruiters, bureaucrats, budget managers, script readers—anyone who has the power to slow, stop, or accelerate access to someone or something. These gatekeepers are used to taking messages that they'll never actually relay, used to deciding whether inquiries are worth the attention of the people they work for, and, above all else, used to saying "no" and "not interested." Their ultimate charter as gatekeepers is to keep the people who are paid to focus on important things from having to make hundreds of tiny decisions every day that threaten to derail productivity. It's easy to see this work from

a cynic's perspective. After all, these are people who are paid to stop others from getting through. But the reality is more nuanced. Great work requires sustained concentration and the ability to devote high-level resources to the projects and tasks that merit this attention. Everything else can be more efficiently dealt with by subordinates or no one at all. Making those calls is a necessary role, and probably thankless.

While it still plays a big part in society and business, human gatekeeping needs to be supplemented or replaced by technological gatekeeping in order for organizations to scale. Some technological gatekeeping is put in place to hide or remove public information. The CEO's direct line can't be listed on the company website, and his or her e-mail address shouldn't be something easily guessed, like `firstname.lastname@companyname.com`. The Radicati Group finds that while the average number of business e-mails received per day is tracking upward, the average number of spam e-mails received is plateauing, thanks in part to automated filtering.<sup>9</sup> This gatekeeping comes at a significant cost, however, as the same report found that medium-size to large companies are each spending millions fighting spam.

Social media is giving a voice to some of the smallest populations on the planet, most of which have few dedicated media providers printing or broadcasting in their native languages or covering topics of direct interest to them. IndigenousTweets.com indexes data about tweets and Twitter users in nearly 150 "indigenous and minority languages" from around the world. The site's profile for the Asturian language, a native language for some in the Asturias region of Spain, lists 738 users and 191,539 individual tweets.<sup>10</sup> These Twitter users hail from some of the most marginalized and disenfranchised groups in the world, and yet they have found a way to connect and engage in the new media landscape, the most remarkable feature of which is the *absence* of barriers. In the words of Kevin Scannel, the professor who leads the effort:

*[Social media have] allowed sometimes-scattered communities to connect and use their languages online in a natural way. Social media have also been important in engaging young people, who are the most important demographic in language revitalization efforts. Together we're breaking down the idea that only global languages like English and French have a place online!*

## Early Adoption and Social Adstock

The technology adoption life cycle has been studied exhaustively ever since Everett Rogers developed his famous Rogers bell curve in 1962.<sup>11</sup> As more of a population adopts a technology, adoption becomes less expensive. However, as a communications technology edges closer to saturation, other costs emerge for its early users. Increased activity volume requires more attention and follow-up. The exclusivity that once appealed to early users—and the related benefits of being in an elite circle—all but disappears. As more people start using the innovation, access is given to anyone and everyone. This is when gatekeeping kicks in as a set of tools and practices that preserve the value of the innovation while reducing the costs associated with being accessed more easily.

Most decision makers aren't actually early adopters, and they're usually not even in the early majority of users when looking at total adoption. But they can be considered early users within their peer group. Executives, for instance, actually tend to lag behind the general population in personal social media use. Of the Fortune 500 CEOs, only about 19 are active on Twitter—less than 4 percent, compared with 34 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>12,13</sup>

Let's consider one Fortune 500 CEO's use of social media. Jack Salzwedel of American Family Mutual Insurance Group has tweeted thousands of times; he has over 2,000 followers, and he is mentioned seven times per day, on average. He's extremely engaged with AmFam-proud employees on Twitter, and not only does he respond

to their tweets, but he chimes in about everything from the weather to books to sports.

But what happens when 7 mentions per day shoot up to 20? Or 78 (the average number of e-mails received by corporate users daily)?<sup>14</sup> Being accessed becomes burdensome when the number is big enough.

Adstock is a way of talking about advertising's influence on what we buy.<sup>15</sup> At its most basic level, repeated exposure to advertising rapidly increases awareness, until the rate of awareness building first slows due to saturation and then plateaus. A similar effect can be found in social media, but the effect permeates more than just influence. Let's call it social media decay. Social media decay occurs on both the individual and systemic levels. When a user first ventures into social media, every event seems significant. Friend requests, Twitter mentions, LinkedIn messages, blog comments—these are all events that excite for hours due to their relative infrequency at the early stages of social media use. There is also the payoff aspect; the effort we've been putting into building a blog readership or into growing our Twitter networks is starting to yield a return. My first few blog posts received almost zero interactions. Then, on my fourth or fifth, out of the ether, a blog comment appeared. I remember how it felt—like it was all up from there. This one positive interaction resonated throughout my entire day, and I could barely wait to write another post and see what would happen next. You'll see this degree of excitement lead to a lot of sad exchanges with spammers on early-stage blogs. An automated spambot will leave a generic, barely intelligible comment like this one from "Dentist Barry," pulled from the spam filter on my blog:

*Hello your website is great .I am with your side that you are making your horizontal knowledge.I would love to know more of your site.Will come back!*

And the new bloggers, bless their souls, will approve the comment and leave enthusiastic replies:



*So glad you liked it, Barry! Thanks for your kind words, and I hope you like my next post, too!*

But the real comments and social interactions keep you going, making you hungry for more. The follower and friend counts climb alongside the number of retweets.

## Shutting Off the Fire Hose

At a certain point—different for everyone—you become saturated with activity. Influence over your actions and thinking, ease of access, and level of engagement begin to taper off.

Influence starts to diminish in that each piece of content, interaction, or social contact holds less power to influence your behavior; it's competing with more and more demands for your attention, and it's less likely to be the basis for any action on your part. For example, say we're looking for a new vendor. We ask our Facebook friends (or Twitter followers or LinkedIn connections) for recommendations. The power of each recommendation to ultimately influence our selection is greater when we're relatively new to social media, and that power gets weaker over time due to volume. Two recommendations are easy to research. Twenty recommendations are not.

We also put less stock in social signals as time goes on. It's not necessarily cynicism—rather it's more of a realism that takes hold with regard to our perception of the motivations of others across the social web. When we're new to the world of social media, we're amazed at how friendly everyone is, even if we find the prevalence of hyperbole and multiple exclamation points a bit odd. Hang around long enough, and we will have been on the other end of a few bad sales pitches that start as social interactions. Maybe we meet someone offline, at a conference, and we're surprised at the incongruity between the person's social media and offline personalities. These things happen more frequently the longer we spend in social media,

and they eventually dispel some of the naiveté we had toward the intentions of others, including the extent to which we should trust what they say, what they recommend—and even who they say they are. It’s a process that leads us to a healthy, mature understanding: people are still people on the social web.

## Recalibrating Access

A reduction of access is another natural consequence of social media maturity. Part of this is due simply to information overload. Too many inputs, not enough processing power, not enough time. Keeping up with what our social contacts are doing and saying is not without costs, and when those costs become too much, it’s time to regulate the flow of information. We can do this by trimming our connections, defriending, unfollowing. We can also adjust the settings of our social networks by telling Facebook, for instance, that we don’t want updates from our crazy cat-lady cousin appearing in our feed. The other reasons we typically limit access to ourselves concern privacy and abuse. After a few phone calls or e-mails from people we don’t care to interact with through those channels, we’ll hide our contact information. More nefarious—but all too common—are phishing scams that use social media to propagate and exploit access.

The flow of inputs is tapered off, and our use of social media starts to look more like our use of e-mail. We don’t read everything aimed at us. We respond to things selectively. The name in the “from” field helps us judge how much attention to devote to the message. Senders we recognize and value will get our attention. Those we don’t, won’t, unless they catch us in the rare moment where curiosity and free time intersect. This is social media decay, and it’s a part of the journey for people who spend enough of their time online. It’s also something that anyone trying to access them will need to learn how to deal with.

# Media Gatekeepers: Not Dead Yet

Some gatekeeping occurs without the people behind the gate ever knowing it. Controlling the flow of information is one of the oldest forms of gatekeeping. Media outlets choose which programs and content to air, newspapers choose what to print, and the audience traditionally has no say in these decisions. Information that is of high value may never reach us, and in the old media environment, the best we could hope for was that at least *some of it does*. Social media has radically changed both distribution and consumption. It amplifies our ability to reach and influence people with information, and it is not constrained by the same level of media gatekeeping.

Information gatekeepers are losing the war to control the stream. But they're still powerful; they still have their jobs. Let me be clear here that I'm not alleging any conspiracies (at least in the free world); I'm not going to tell you that a powerful elite holds an iron grip on information to willfully disadvantage the masses or to shape our reality. Certainly, our reality is shaped by what we see and hear, but this is a consequence of nature and not an elaborate scheme for our minds and obedience. Even in the historically oppressed corners of the world, in which information *is* subject to control by an "elaborate scheme" of censors and other apparatchiks, people are finding ways to connect. To them, social media is more escape hatch than side door.

Interestingly, the fact that you and I can access a vast, digital universe of conspiracy theories (and the fact that the loony-bin conspiracy website *Infowars* ranks among the top 500 websites in the United States) is a testament to how wide the cracks in the information barriers are getting.

But why did barriers exist in the first place? The gatekeepers have a few goals that are worth considering.

First, gatekeepers can serve as filters for truth and accuracy. By stanching the flow of bad information and only releasing information after careful and thorough vetting, gatekeepers ostensibly make sure the inputs to our worldview, beliefs, and resulting decisions are

based on their controlled information output of “better” information. This might be called “paternalism by filtering.”

Second, gatekeepers aim to steer the public’s collective focus toward what matters rather than toward things that are trivial, irrelevant, or inconsequential. A classic example of this role is the media’s handling of John F. Kennedy’s sex life. As Alicia C. Shepard wrote in *American Journalism Review*:

*It used to be so simple back in the days when John F. Kennedy was president. What reporters covering the White House knew about his promiscuity never saw its way into print. It just wasn’t considered relevant.*<sup>16</sup>

Third, gatekeepers may control the flow of information in an attempt to shape outcomes. In other words, traditional media might *actively* try to push content that supports a particular agenda—a step beyond bias by omission to bias by inclusion.

You’re likely familiar with the case of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed, black teenager who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch captain in an Orlando suburb on February 26, 2012.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent evidence, including tragic 911 recordings, suggests that the shooting was, in fact, a coldblooded murder. It seems that Martin was buying Skittles and threatening nobody. The jury disagreed and acquitted the shooter, George Zimmerman. That’s the sad story you know. But there’s another story here about media gatekeeping.

Black media was quick to pick up this story of alleged racial violence, as were local news outlets.<sup>18</sup> But it wasn’t until the story was cascading through the social web, the subject of hundreds of thousands of Facebook posts and tweets for weeks, that it garnered the attention of the national, mainstream media. The discrepancy between social and mainstream pickup is a telling one. Decision makers at mainstream outlets seem to have originally decided that the story didn’t merit national attention or wouldn’t be of particular interest to their audiences. But those same audiences voted with their tweets, giving the story the social proof it needed to be

escalated into the top-tier media dialogue and all-day, live trial coverage. This misalignment demonstrated two things with refreshing clarity. First, neither the spread of information nor the consumption of information relies on traditional media anymore. Second, while gatekeeping still exists, the media will respond with coverage if persuaded by enough social proof.

Media gatekeepers are now able to control the flow of their information only through their owned properties. Other stories, narratives, and characters have an unprecedented ability to compete with the traditional players, and, increasingly, they're able to win. One story that's particularly hard to bury: the data isn't looking good for traditional media. Ad revenue for national newspapers is declining by double digits year over year.<sup>19</sup> Television consumption by the coveted 18-to 24-year-old segment is waning.<sup>20</sup> Publishing, too, is undergoing a rapid transformation. E-book sales are beating out every other format in book sales for the first time.<sup>21</sup> Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has shared that e-books "is a multibillion-dollar category for us and growing fast," while physical book sales are experiencing record-low growth rates.<sup>22</sup> Both booksellers and publishers have had little choice but to embrace the trend, but for ailing retailers like Barnes and Noble, it may be too little, too late. Author Clay Shirky told me:

*Publishers are a little bit mystified that although none of their mechanisms for calling attention to things have gotten worse, by comparison the public's ability to call attention to things has gotten immeasurably much better. Whereas the public writ large, when they decide they like something, whether it's a LOLcat or anything else, it can blow up.*

## The War for Impressions

Competition between media firms of every type now hinges, more than ever before, on speed and volume. Being the first on the story

means more impressions, views, and ultimately advertising dollars. Similarly, having more content to fill the airwaves in a 24-hour news cycle, or new articles to greet visitors when they visit your home page, is an advantage over the competition in the contest for the increasingly fleeting attention span of the modern consumer. Gawker Media, the empire behind hugely successful blogs like *Gawker* (gossip), *Kotaku* (gaming), and *Gizmodo* (gadgets), makes no bones about it, which ruffles more than a few old-guard feathers. In an interview on NBC's *Rock Center*, Gawker Media CEO Nick Denton was almost shockingly straightforward about it:

*People need to get their head around the fact that the web is different, that we publish faster, we change faster, we correct faster, and frankly, that our standards of publication are lower.*<sup>23</sup>

*Gawker* has a public leaderboard where writers are ranked based on new visitors and page views for their pieces across all the company's owned media properties, and a large television in the newsroom displays and updates the board in real time to stir up competition among the writers.

The practice isn't isolated to start-up type media operations either, reports the Gray Lady herself, the *New York Times*:

*Tracking how many people view articles, and then rewarding—or shaming—writers based on those results has become increasingly common in old and new media newsrooms. The Christian Science Monitor now sends a daily e-mail message to its staff that lists the number of page views for each article on the paper's Web site that day. [ . . . ] The New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times all display a 'most viewed' list on their home pages. Some media outlets, including Bloomberg News and Gawker Media, now pay writers based in part on how many readers click on their articles.*<sup>24</sup>

## The New Content Creators

Even nonmedia companies are getting into this game, realizing that great, shareable content delivered at high velocity can increase brand loyalty, awareness, and sales. *iQ*, an interactive magazine of sorts from Intel, uses algorithmic and employee curation of articles from around the web to “Share and source content that inspires, educates, entertains and helps all of us to better understand our modern world.”<sup>25</sup> Energy drink Red Bull has an entire spin-off enterprise devoted to publishing, including *The Red Bulletin*, a glossy lifestyle magazine made the old-fashioned way—with paper. But most brands are having trouble keeping up with the need to provide fresh content at an ever-increasing rate. One study of 1,000 business-to-business marketers revealed that 41 percent of them consider the production of engaging content their “biggest content marketing challenge,” followed by “producing enough content” at 20 percent.<sup>26</sup> Companies across the spectra of size and type, including GE, Cisco, Boeing, and Dogfish Head Beer, are hiring trained journalists and editors to create the kind of compelling content that marketers often struggle with. Seizing on this new trend, Contently and a handful of other start-ups have emerged to help brands find freelance journalists.

## You Are a Source

This explosion in demand for content is a massive opportunity for people looking to build audiences and credibility in their respective fields. No matter what your area of expertise, there are people today, with established platforms, looking for sources and contributors just like you. The more visible you are online, the likelier you’ll be approached to provide a quote, a comment, or even a full op-ed. In its “Digital Journalism Study,” PR group Oriella found that reporters are becoming exceptionally reliant on new media for sources. The study determined that:

- 54 percent of journalists now use “microblogging updates” (e.g., posts from Twitter, Facebook, and other international networks), and 44 percent use blogs to source information from individuals and accounts they are already familiar with
- 26 percent of respondents use “unfamiliar social media sources” in the same way
- 69 percent of journalists in the United States maintain a personal blog, which is the perfect initial social media side door for aspiring sources

## Slipping Standards

There’s a bit of a dark side here. When things are mass-produced, quality tends to suffer, and the things themselves are cheapened. Content is being affected by the same forces that were at play in the Industrial Revolution and are at play now in globalization. Scale cuts corners, glosses over flaws, and overindexes on quantity—on getting it out the door. Standards are easier to maintain when the competition maintains them, too, but what if you’re a century-old newspaper and your competition is the *Gawkers* of the world? Good luck telling investors that your newsroom won’t participate in the click contests that shape and define modern media. In this landscape, those who understand the game have the power and the floor.

Warhol’s 15 minutes of fame has been cut down to 15 seconds, or however long it takes to get bumped to page two. Platforms are no longer built brick by brick and dollar by dollar. Sometimes they are flash floods of attention; most of the time they ebb and flow like calmer waters. But they are always moving, never still. There’s no resting anymore on that single mention in the *Wall Street Journal* or *TechCrunch*. Eyes on the horizon, always—opportunities are everywhere, but so is your competition. It doesn’t matter that you’re a better source. It doesn’t matter that you don’t share a common customer base. The competition is vying for the attention



of the blogger or journalist who competes for impressions with his or her colleagues, rival outlets, and pictures of puppies in adorable costumes.

## Visible and Accessible

Just one link in a well-trafficked article can drive thousands of new visitors to your site and result in dozens of new blog subscribers while taking your search engine visibility to new highs. Your words in a top-tier publication serve as convincing evidence of your command of a subject; this can beef up your bio and portfolio while opening up many more opportunities with writers from other outlets filing derivative stories or bookmarking your profile for future outreach. Opportunities like this build on one another. If you become known as a good source, your name will be shared with others, and you'll be approached by some of the same writers over and over again. Through just one person who I met at a conference and kept in touch with across social channels, I've contributed to half a dozen articles on high-profile sites like *FastCompany.com*, and I now have familiarity with and access to the editors of those sites when I want to contribute my own bylines.

The key is being proactive and not expecting people to come to you. If you want to become a known quantity, you have to get in front of people. Engage through social media with platform gatekeepers; comment on and share their work. Contribute in small ways here and there with added perspective or constructive criticism. Link to their pieces from your own blog. Ask them if they accept guest posts, and send them original work. What you'll soon realize is that a lot of bloggers and editors see good guest posts as a "day off," one less post they have to worry about writing themselves. Knowing this, you should always frame your outreach in terms of an opportunity for *them*, not a request from *you*. And if you drive traffic and sharing, you'll be invited back. It's like a comedy club:

if you draw a crowd and the members of the audience buy a lot of drinks, you'll get stage time whenever you want.

## Everyone's a Critic

This all means that the cost of entry into the media landscape for the average person has fallen dramatically. Want to be a singer? Post videos on YouTube and record your own MP3s. Want to be a writer? Start blogging and put together an e-book. Want to be a critic? Start critiquing the films you see and post them online. You'll encounter very few filters along the way.

But there's another side of gatekeeping that benefits those who are let through. Gatekeepers have audiences and resources. Once you're through, you're in front of a crowd that has been gathered *for* you, not *by* you. Gatekeepers have promotional budgets, ratings, and sales targets to hit and bosses to please. Letting you through is an investment. They might buy ads for you or give you airtime or book you high-profile gigs—expensive, time-consuming things that are extremely difficult for the average person to achieve alone.

When you're on your own, building an audience is the hardest part. There's a saying that drives me nuts: "Content is king." Oh that it were so! What about the millions of great authors, musicians, and comedians you've never heard of, and never will? Their content is superb, and yet they toil in relative obscurity. Why? They devote most or all of their time to perfecting the content and not enough time building an audience for it.

## The Embassy of You: Better Your Life by Blogging

This section isn't called "How to Get Blog Comments" or "How to Make Your Posts Go Viral." Google those things if you'd like, but be wary of what you read. When the how-to format meets blogging,

the quality of advice often gets iffy. Blog comments, “engagement,” subscribers, top 100 placement—they’re all means to an ill-defined end. These things are not the goal; they’re only loose indicators that you’re on track toward something bigger. Everyone blogs to better his or her life in some way. Blogging can make a very real impact on that one big goal, if you stay away from measuring your success in ways that have nothing to do with what you’re really after.

To make an impact, you need a central outpost that acts as the heart of your social media presence. Blogs are great for this. They are built for long-form content like blog posts, but they can also be a great way to aggregate your tweets and YouTube videos and link to your Facebook and LinkedIn profiles and other digital footprints you’d like to showcase. Think of your blog as an embassy. If strangers were to visit the Embassy of You, what would you want them to see? More importantly, what would *they* want to see?

Play to your strengths and write about what you know. If you’re trying to prove to the world that you’re an expert in something, abide by the old writers’ saying, “Show, don’t tell.” Don’t simply *tell* people about your expertise. Anyone can do that. You need to *show* it. Write with authority about something you have passion for, and your “expert self” will steal the show. Most of the people you’re competing with will start by talking about themselves, playing up their status, telling the world how great they are at something—and little else.

Define your niche. Generalists usually don’t get very far, because they’re going toe-to-toe with millions of others who have been doing it longer and probably better. Google likes niches, too. Unique content fares better in search results, so ask yourself what the people you’d like to influence are searching for.

Don’t be shy about featuring what others have said about you and your work. On the page of your blog that explains who you are, let others tell the story for you—they’re better at it. Pretend it’s the back of a book. Public praise by a third party is infinitely more effective than self-congratulatory copy. Successful blogger Brian Clark put it

this way: “What other people say about you is more important than what you say about yourself.”<sup>27</sup>

Some of the praise you feature will come naturally, even unexpectedly. But you’ll usually need to ask for it when you’ve done good work, so make a habit of it. Be sure to disclose that you plan on putting their words on your blog. Most will be flattered.

After putting in all that work, the last thing you want to do is sit back and wait, believing content is king. The concept of reciprocity should guide your efforts to promote your blog. Think about what actions you want people to take when they visit your blog; literally make a list of them. Then make a list of bloggers who you respect, whose work you enjoy, and whom you’d like to get to know better. Make sure to include bloggers who *aren’t* hugely popular yet; due to the volume of activity on their blogs (and also perhaps due to their egos), well-known bloggers are less likely to reciprocate.

Now the fun part. Take your list of people, visit their blogs, and start doing the things on your other list. Comment on their blogs; subscribe to their newsletters; send thoughtful tweets in their direction. You’ll quickly find that people like people who validate their work in these ways, and they like people who share their passions. Many of them will take a moment to discover who you are by following the link in your Twitter profile or the backlink in your blog comments. And then they’ll reciprocate by commenting, sharing your content, or doing something else similar to what you did for them. Just don’t hold it against them if some of them don’t. Reciprocation is not a right, and people that feel entitled to it usually aren’t well liked.

The best part about building a network of influence that leads back to your blog—and you—is that the actions you take pay for themselves many times over even if they aren’t reciprocated. If you’re reading the best bloggers in your space, you’re constantly learning how to do your job better. Reading great work is rewarding in and of itself. You’re also gathering ideas to discuss and material to quote and to reference, and you’re getting insight into what seems to be

resonating with their audience, with which there is bound to be significant overlap if you're truly in a similar niche. I'll reiterate that common activity and engagement metrics shouldn't be used to validate your efforts, but they can serve as indicators of which content seems to be hitting the mark. Start experimenting with emulating some of the best of what you read, the stuff that really seems to ignite dialogue in the comments or spread like wildfire across the social web.

Emulate does not mean copy. In fact, the best thing you can do as an emerging blogger is give proper credit where it is due. Even if a post is only loosely based on another's idea, be sure to acknowledge this by letting your readers know and linking to the original. This isn't just a goodwill exercise and the right thing to do; it's a strategic must. Most bloggers receive "pingback" alerts, which tell them when someone has linked to one of their posts or pages and where the link lives online. They'll often follow the pingback trail to your blog, which can be the beginning or acceleration of a rewarding relationship. It's a special thrill to learn that someone you truly admire has subscribed to your blog.

Finding the time to write can be difficult. I've been blogging for years, and the truth is, it doesn't get any easier—but it does get more rewarding. Once you start to see your disparate efforts coalesce into results, blogging becomes something you can't imagine not doing. One of the secrets to building awareness and influence is that almost everyone wants more content, even the biggest names in your space. Of any tactic I've pursued to build social access and influence through blogging, guest posts are the most effective. The value created by a good guest post on someone else's blog is pretty remarkable. Think about it: You get access to a new, larger audience. They get free content that drives traffic to their doorstep. But guest blogging is about relationships, and quality of content trails a distant second. Aspiring guest bloggers should be very familiar with the style and subject matter of the host blog. They should cultivate a rapport with the blogger by leaving interesting comments on the

blog posts, sharing their work, and making themselves known. This is also a way for the host blogger to become familiar with the guest blogger's writing style and area expertise. You're ready, as a guest blogger, when you can be reasonably sure the host blogger will recognize your name in the "from" line of an e-mail and when you have an idea that will fit right in with the blog's content. Don't make the mistake of reaching out without something specific in mind. And if the host blogger shows interest in the content you propose, don't waste an opportunity to get the terms right for your guest post. Make sure to discuss how your bio and byline will appear, where it will link to (a social profile, your blog, or both), and whether or not you'll be able to cross-post it to your blog with a link back to the original. Most top bloggers are flexible on these items and happy to discuss them, as long as you give them clear input and don't nitpick.

The mere fact that you are blogging means that you are positively differentiating yourself from the pack. Everyone wants 50 comments on every post, 10,000 subscribers, and a healthy dose of ad revenue. But the truth is, only a tiny percentage of bloggers experience any of that. Too many bloggers start comparing themselves with the best in the business right out of the gate. While it's great to learn from the best, it's not smart to expect the results they have from less work. It's also not smart to write your blog off as a failure because it's not getting the activity you're after, even though you are putting in the work. If it never becomes anything more than a record of your thoughts or a collection of your best work, it is still worth it—and you are still doing something valuable that most are not.