The Report Committee for Adib Edward Masumian
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

Medium.com as a Contender in the Participatory Web

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Joan E. Hughes

Paul Resta

Medium.com as a Contender in the Participatory Web

by

Adib Edward Masumian, B.S.Comm.Stds.

Report

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Abstract

Medium.com as a Contender in the Participatory Web

Adib Edward Masumian, M.A.

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Supervisor: Joan E. Hughes

This Master's report represents the culmination of a self-study that lasted from January to May 2014, wherein I set out to evaluate the standing of Medium.com—an online communal blogging platform—as a contender in the participatory web. I conducted the original self-study with a fixed scope and a certain set of goals in mind. Based on feedback from my instructor and peers, however, I have endeavored to build upon my prior research by further analyzing my personal experience with Medium's participatory aspects, taking my previous conclusions in a new direction, and using the benefit of a year's hindsight—between the present day and the time when I finished the first version of this paper—to see how far Medium has come. This Master's report, therefore, will be split into two parts. The first, entitled "The Original Self-Study on Participatory Web Activities," will feature a complete and unaltered report of the original research I carried out last year. The second, "Another Look," features a) a review of the updates Medium has implemented over the past year, which have allowed for greater discoverability for Medium's published content and richer modes of interaction between its users; b) a snapshot of Medium's userbase and incoming traffic as illustrated by data analytics; c) a revisiting of Medium's participatory aspects and list of best practices for engaging with the service; d) a review of Medium's competition; e) an updated conclusion that synthesizes the foregoing items. From these assessments, I have concluded that

Medium is continuing to take steps to become the ideal communal publishing platform where anyone can publish and be discovered, and that the site is consolidating its status as a major player in today's participatory web.

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Part One: The Original Self-Study on Participatory Web Activities

In his whitepaper on the subject, Jenkins (2006) has defined participatory culture as one with "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (p. 3)—a culture "in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (p. 3). Jenkins argued that, within this culture, it is necessary for participants to develop "new media literacies," which he defines as "a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape" (p. 4)—essentially, thriving in new digital mediums demands the acquisition of new digital skills. Among these skills are appropriation, distributed cognition, and several others (p. 4). For my PSC project ("participant, semantic, connected"; further discussed below), I chose to publish a series of topically related stories on Medium.com (henceforth Medium) and gauge the levels of exposure that these stories could receive based on how I chose to distribute them online. In the first part of this paper, I will evaluate the ways in which Medium's affordances enable it to serve as a contender in the participatory web by aligning these affordances with Jenkins' new media literacies. In so doing, I will be using these literacies as yardsticks by which we can measure the extent of Medium's participatory culture. Since I do not think all of Jenkins' literacies are relevant here, I will select only the ones that I do feel apply to Medium and assess the degree to which they are applicable. In the second part of the paper, I will shift to a discussion of my own experience with Medium insofar as my PSC project is concerned. This discussion will include an explanation of my project, an outline of my project goals, a description of what my findings revealed, and a reflection on what I could have done differently to achieve more favorable results.

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Section One: Medium and Its Participatory Affordances

Medium is a communal blog publishing platform where users have the freedom to publish stories about any topic of their choosing. It was founded in August 2012 by Twitter co-founders Evan Williams and Biz Stone (Warren, 2012). The site is moderated by editorial staff that is responsible for curating the content that appears on the front page, which tends to feature stories about entrepreneurship. The service also allows for a relatively high level of interaction between its users and its published content. For this reason, Medium has been considered an experiment in social journalism, which seeks to combine professional journalism and meaningful input from the reader in a freely available platform (Sussman, 2014).

There are a number of ways in which users can interact with published content on Medium. The service features an inline commenting system, which is not common on publishing platforms. This system allows users to highlight a selection of the story—be it a single word or an entire paragraph—and leave a comment specific to that selection. Portions of a story that have received comments have a speech bubble in the right hand margin containing the number of comments that selection has received. Users can click this bubble to expand the list of comments. This more intuitive approach to commenting enables the user to address specific points in a story more easily than traditional commenting systems allow, which push all of the comments below the article and force the reader to specify the points to which they are responding. The comments are also threaded—though only to a degree—and this helps with organization and readability. Unlike platforms such as Reddit, which allow virtually unlimited comment threading, comments on Medium cannot be indented more than one level below the top level, regardless of whether you are responding to a top-level comment or someone's response to that comment. This is

ostensibly because the location of the comments (the margin) renders the kind of "deep indentation" where a single page can display all of the comments impossible.

Aside from commenting on stories, users have the ability to recommend stories by clicking a "Recommend" button located below every story. According to the Medium FAQ, "Clicking this button is one of the signals that contributes to the algorithm which determines the order of trending stories within a collection. [Medium]…also use[s] this [tool] to provide feedback to the author" (Fisher & Esterkyn, 2013). I will go into more detail about collections below.

Users can also suggest links for further reading, and are thus able to generate a list of resources similar to the kind that one would find at the bottom of a Wikipedia article. Once a user contributes a link, it will remain private—visible only to the contributor and the author— until the author approves it for public viewing.

There are also built-in sharing tools at the bottom of each story, which allow the user to share a story on Twitter or Facebook easily. They also have the option to send the story to someone via email or to access the story's embed code so that they can embed it into a custom website.

The last significant way in which a user can interact with Medium is through creating, following, and submitting stories to others' collections. The purpose of collections is to aggregate topically related stories under a larger umbrella theme. For instance, "Language & Linguistics" has its own collection of stories (Sakhnov, n.d.). Anyone can create a collection, which then becomes public, and anyone can submit his or her work to those collections. However, there is no guarantee that the collection owner will approve a person's work, and even if they do, the process could take several weeks. Users can search for collections and choose to

follow them. This will affect the stream they see when visiting the main page of Medium by interspersing it with stories from the collections they are following (instead of generating a randomly curated list of popular content, which is what happens by default). When a user creates his or her own collection, they are essentially creating a space where anyone in the world could potentially host their stories. To help facilitate this process, Medium gives users the option of adding tags (relevant keywords) to their collection, which are designed to increase its discoverability. Users can also appoint editors for their collections by typing their Twitter handle. If the prospective editor accepts the position, they will be able to approve or reject submissions to a person's collection. Lastly, users can embed collections into websites to increase their viral potential. I will note here that collections on Medium are not like Pinterest boards, which allow users to gather content from across the site (or even the entire Internet) into a single place. In other words, users cannot create a collection of their own and then add others' Medium stories to it—their purpose is strictly to give others a thematically relevant, crowdsourced venue to which they may submit their own stories. Thus, the purpose of Medium collections is not to help the user aggregate disparate content; rather, it is to help him or her procure greater exposure for their stories. However, Medium does have the bookmarks feature to fill this gap. Every story features a "bookmark" button at the top, which a user can click to add the story to his or her list of bookmarks and subsequently access on the main page of the site. It is in this way that bookmarks allow anyone to create a list of their "favorite" stories.

I will also note that engaging with Medium in the most meaningful ways—such as publishing stories, leaving comments on other peoples' stories, and utilizing collections— requires a Twitter account, which is linked to Medium. The reasoning behind this is unclear. It is possible that the founders simply wanted to streamline the registration process by tapping into an

existing social network, though it more than likely has something to do with the fact that they also created Twitter and are synchronizing the two services as a way to increase traction for Twitter. The founders did not address this question in the Medium FAQ.

Similar to standard blog sites, Medium contributors have access to certain analytics that give them insight into the level of exposure their stories have received. By going to their "stats" page, contributors can see a list of their stories and a bar graph illustrating the number of views, reads, and recommendations that their stories have received. By default, the graph is set to display the content consumption data for all of a contributor's stories; however, clicking on the title of a specific story will modify the graph to indicate how readers have interacted with that one story. It is interesting that Medium actually distinguishes between a cursory view and a top-to-bottom read. While this does not guarantee an accurate reflection of how many people actually read the story, it does take this dimension of analyzing content consumption to a deeper level than most publishing platforms offer. Medium also collects "referral" data for stories. This means that a contributor has insight into the sources from which his or her stories were accessed (e.g. Facebook, email, some other external site, or from somewhere within Medium). Medium has additionally set itself apart from traditional blogging platforms by indicating approximately how long it will take someone to read a particular story in terms of minutes. The FAQ does not specify how the service arrives at these estimates. A personal guess is that Medium divides the number of words contained in the story by the average number of words a proficient speaker of English can read per minute.

Based on the above overview of its affordances, let us now consider the new media literacies users can develop by reading and contributing to Medium. The first of these is **appropriation**, which Jenkins (2006) defined as "the ability to meaningfully sample and remix

media content" (p. 32). Medium allows users to insert images and YouTube clips into their stories, which can help visually reinforce the content in a stimulating way. I used the YouTube integration in one of my own Medium stories, "The Secret Code," (Masumian, 2014a) to better illustrate the topic I was discussing.

Medium also leverages **distributed cognition** through some of its inherent editorial features. Jenkins (2006) defined distributed cognition as "the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand our mental capacities" (p. 37). Medium's minimalist WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") interface makes the story writing process highly intuitive; the user does not have to deal with HTML or any other markup language. The user need only highlight a piece of text to utilize most of the editorial features, such as inserting an image; boldfacing, italicizing, or block quoting text; and inserting a hyperlink. The story-writing engine features a spell checker and actually prevents users from inserting more than one consecutive space or carriage return. This mechanism ensures that even less computer-savvy contributors will not be able to clutter their stories with unnecessary spacing. However, one could argue that this is more of a detriment than a benefit—novice users may never develop the necessary skills for identifying and rectifying these mistakes if they never have the chance to make them in the first place.

Collective intelligence—"the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others towards a common goal" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 39)—is a new media literacy that is highly applicable to Medium. The streamlined nature of the platform enables it to accommodate inline comments from the reader alongside a person's story and display a user-generated list of suggested links for further reading. The ability users have to create, interact with, and submit their own stories to thematic collections is an example of how efficiently content on Medium can be organized, curated, and followed.

The fact that all of the above literacies are present on Medium has implications for its handling of **transmedia navigation**, or "the ability to deal with the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 46). That Medium supports embedded videos, images, hyperlinks, suggested links for further reading, and comments in the margins of stories—which could potentially include any or all of these resources—indicates that it is well equipped to portray information from various sources. It is thus irrelevant whether that information comes from somewhere within Medium (e.g. an embedded image, a reader comment) or outside of it (e.g. a suggested link for further reading).

The last new media literacy that Medium supports is **networking**, defined as "the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 49). A native "ethos of sharing" underlies the service, as evidenced by the "share" buttons at the bottom of every story. Users are also able to embed stories and even entire collections onto custom websites. The fact that one can append tags to his or her collections indicates that the site places a premium on enhancing discoverability for stories. Indeed, the very purpose of collections is to give users a thematically relevant place to which they may submit their stories, thereby increasing the likelihood that others will discover them.

Now that I have evaluated Medium as a contender in the participatory web, I will shift the discussion to my PSC project.

Section Two: PSC Project

The purpose of the PSC project was to become part of the "participant / semantic / connected culture" of the Internet by engaging with, creating and sharing content, and learning from the Internet. For my project, I spent two and a half months (February to April 2014) writing Medium stories on a weekly basis. The general theme of my stories dealt with language, though I covered different aspects of that subject including translation, cultural influence on language, linguistic determinism, and semantic change. Language has always been an interest of mine, and though I have always wanted to write about it informally online, I also wanted a sense that people were actually going to read what I wrote—a sense I never got from prior experience with traditional blogging platforms like Blogger or WordPress. After my first encounter with Medium, I noticed most of its participatory affordances and decided that I wanted to explore the service further by contributing stories to it on a regular basis. I also felt that this exercise would help me gauge Medium's effectiveness as an unrestricted platform for distributing informal writing, which it purports to be. Moreover, I noticed after this first encounter that the editorial staff features certain posts on the front page, and that there seems to be a bias in this selection towards stories about entrepreneurship (perhaps a sensible bias, considering the site's founders are serial entrepreneurs themselves). Given this slant, I deliberately chose a topic like language—one that I felt was niche compared to most of the Medium stories in the limelight—to see how much exposure they could receive. In addition to the subject matter, however, I also wanted to assess the extent to which my choice in story distribution—be it through a social network, email, or not sharing at all—would have an effect on exposure. For this project, I wrote nine stories in total and chose to employ five different channels for distributing them:

1. **Facebook**: Of my nine Medium posts, I shared two of them on Facebook. Admittedly, I felt these were my two best-written pieces, and—considering my large Facebook network (>1,700 friends)—I figured sharing them on that site would give them the greatest possible traction.

2. **Medium Collections**: I submitted seven of my nine stories to the Language & Linguistics collection, but as far as I can tell, the editor(s) of the collection never approved them—their status is still marked as "pending."

3. **Email**: I emailed one of my stories to a few friends and family members to see what effect that would have.

4. **LinkedIn**: In hindsight, Twitter would probably have been a more effective alternative since its hashtags have proven viral potential. However, I do not have a Twitter account. It was therefore easier for me to use LinkedIn instead, where I do have a presence and a considerable audience.

5. **Nowhere**: I chose not to distribute five of my pieces on any social networks. In doing this, I wanted to see how much exposure my pieces could get "on their own merits," without the assistance of social networks.

Table 1 depicts the traction that my posts received:

Story	Shared to	No. of Views	No. of Reads	Read Ratio	No. of Recs
Language and Translation	Facebook	55	41	75%	0
Translation and Acting	Nowhere	3	2	67%	0
The "Pure Language" Myth	Email	5	4	80%	0
The Prescriptivist/Descriptivist Spectrum	Nowhere	0	0	0	0
The Secret Code	Facebook	36	22	61%	1
Is A Translation Always A Translation?	Nowhere	0	0	0	0
Isolated Immersion	Nowhere	0	0	0	0
The Fluid Nature of Words	Nowhere	0	0	0	0
When Languages Love Concepts	LinkedIn	4	4	100%	0

Table 1: The results of my self-study.

These findings are consistent in their indication of a positive correlation between audience size and the level of traction. The two stories I shared to Facebook, where I have the largest audience, received the most hits, while the stories I distributed to relatively underpopulated networks—or no networks at all—received minimal or no exposure. My stories were never featured, and the stories I submitted to collections were never approved.

Section Three: Conclusion

The conclusion I draw from these results is that one cannot simply write about any topic of their choosing on Medium and necessarily expect it to receive wide exposure. There is certainly a formula for achieving greater traction, which I have not had a chance to explore— perhaps focusing on entrepreneurship would be a start. In retrospect, I could have expanded the scope of my project so that, rather being limited to one topic (language), it could have encompassed a wider variety of potentially more viral subject matter. As mentioned above, I also might have benefited from using Twitter to distribute the stories. One does not necessarily need an audience at all on Twitter to receive exposure—oftentimes, relevant hashtags are more than capable of accomplishing that goal.

While it is not the "publisher's paradise" I had initially imagined, Medium is nonetheless a unique platform that effectively lowers the publishing barrier for the common ruminator. I would suggest that the site's administrators tackle one glaring hurdle: The undue attention given to stories about entrepreneurship, and the neglect other stories inevitably face as a result. If they are able to overcome this tendency and thus level the playing field for contributors of all backgrounds, Medium will be an even more effective contender in the participatory web than it has already proven itself to be.

Part Two: Another Look

More than one year has passed since Part One of this report was completed in May 2014. In that time, it is natural for any service—particularly one that is hosted online—to undergo a variety of changes. The purpose of Part Two of this report is, first, to present an extensive review of the changes that have taken place on Medium.com in the past year. Second, I will delve deeper into the demographics of Medium's userbase—as well as the volume of its incoming traffic—with the help of Alexa's analytics tools. This data will add an enlightening dimension to the self-study that was absent in Part One. Third, I will expand on the personal experience I had previously outlined in Part One in terms of Medium's participatory aspects—elaborations that were similarly absent in Part One. Last, I will conduct a more thorough comparison between Medium and other blogging platforms, communal and otherwise. Adding these new sections to the report will naturally require an updated conclusion, with which I will close this report.

Section One: Recent Developments with Medium

Over the past year, Medium has undergone a number of changes. Some of these changes involve cosmetic alterations to the site while others add new features and functionality. The same fundamental goals, however, underlie both kinds of changes: (a) improved discoverability and general access to published content; (b) increased capability to handle richer content. For a detailed survey of these changes, one may refer to Medium's official blog, "The Story."[1] This is the page where Medium announces all of their new updates and features. I will conduct this review in chronological order beginning with the updates that were implemented shortly after I concluded the original self-study and continuing to the present day. Given the high number of updates that have occurred in this timeframe, however, I will limit my survey to two types of

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[1] Medium. "The Story — Medium." https://medium.com/the-story

updates: (1) the ones that bear direct relevance to my original self-study; (2) the ones that were designed to accomplish the two aforementioned goals: (a) improved discoverability and general access to published content; (b) increased capability to handle richer content.

The first development that occurred since concluding my original self-study was the Medium blog itself. The Story was launched on May 19, 2014—nearly three weeks after I completed the original self-study on May 1 of that year. The editors at Medium expressed their main goal with this blog in straightforward terms: "We will use this blog to keep you updated on new features and changes to Medium, as well as any other announcements or thoughts we want to share with you" (Medium, 2014a). The editors also mentioned their reasons for launching the blog: "…since we are dedicated to sharing everyone's stories with the world through the written word, we figured it was time to put some of our *own* words down, to keep you posted on what's happening with us." Furthermore, "We value openness and transparency, and want you to understand what, when, and why we are doing what we're doing." Now that Medium is publicly outlining all of their updates, the user is better able to keep track of what is happening with the service and are able to establish a better connection with it. If on a given day, for instance, the editors changed the layout of the main page and wrote an entry about that change in The Story, it would save the user the trouble of navigating that layout without understanding why it was changed or how to maneuver it. This decision might have come across as sudden, inscrutable, and unjustified if the blog did not exist. These barriers do not exist in environments that are more transparent, such as the one Medium is trying to create with this initiative.

The next update (May 22, 2014) consisted of a measure to further integrate Medium with Facebook by allowing the user to sign up to the service with their Facebook account. In my original self-study, I had previously noted that users were only able to participate on Medium

with a Twitter account, adding that "the reasoning behind this is unclear" (4) and that "the founders did not address this question in the Medium FAQ" (5). Furthermore, I made the following suggestion: "It is possible that the founders simply wanted to streamline the registration process by tapping into an existing social network, though it more than likely has something to do with the fact that they also created Twitter and are synchronizing the two services as a way to increase traction for Twitter" (4–5). To this date, the editors have still not explained why they had initially required their users to register with Twitter accounts, and in their blog post on this update—"Sign Up for Medium with Facebook"—they did not give a reason for expanding the registration options to include Facebook. What is clear, however, is that this move automatically increased the number of people eligible to participate on Medium. The reason lies in the numbers; according to the most recently available statistics, Facebook had 1.18 billion monthly active users as of March 2015 (Facebook, 2015), while Twitter had 302 million—less than a third of that figure—as of May 2015 (Quintaro, 2015). It is possible that the editors came to see their exclusive preference for Twitter registrations as a handicap and that including Facebook as a registration option would increase user activity on the site.

The update after that (May 30, 2014), the initial release of the Medium app for the iPad, was designed to further extend the range of form factors in which the user can consume and publish content on Medium. There are presently 650,000 users on Medium—a figure I gleaned from their Editor's Picks collection, to which every Medium user is automatically subscribed—but it is not clear how many of them own iPads. If this statistic were more readily available, it may shed some light on the extent to which this release increased general access for those Medium users with iPads. It is possible, however, that iPad users who are not currently on

Medium may come across the service in a search on the iPad App Store, thus increasing the discoverability of the service.

Just three days later (June 1, 2014), Evan Hansen—the Head of Content Labs at Medium—announced an update on an experiment with paid collections that Medium had been conducting. To summarize, Medium had contracted a number of people to run collections. These people were expected to "go out and build the biggest audience they could" (Hansen, 2014) by whatever means necessary, whether it involved writing their own stories, hiring others to write stories, or simply adding existing stories to their collection. Hansen notes that Medium had "several business goals" in mind with this experiment, including: "diversifying the mix of stories on Medium, attracting high quality writers and posts, increasing readership, learning about how the platform really works, and anticipating how publishers might come to adopt it down the road…" These contracted collectors were compensated according to a pay-per-view model. Hansen summed up the result of the experiment concisely: "Predictably, a few editors excelled at creating attention and building large audiences on Medium under this model, while many more failed to do so." He then went on to describe one of the experiment's major failings: "We also learned (surprise) that high quality posts do not automatically garner attention and audience commensurate with the effort of producing them. As a result, our payment model failed to support some really terrific contributors." Beyond that observation, Hansen goes on to entertain a number of possible culprits for the experiment's ultimate failure—the payment model, the distribution of attention online, what Medium's general audience may be interested in at any given moment, or editorial judgment (or "a mix of all four, and other more subtle things to boot"). Hansen essentially concluded the announcement by saying that, as a startup, Medium was doing the natural thing by testing the waters to see what would yield them the most traction; that

this particular attempt was not a success; and that new attempts would inevitably follow. Hansen, wanting to end the announcement on a positive note, offered a final prospect that was hopeful in tone: "As of now, we're planning several new features and announcements in the coming months, many of them directly informed by our experiments with commissioned collections." Though there was no call for users to offer their comments or suggest other initiatives, several readers did just that by taking advantage of Medium's inline commenting feature. When Hansen mentioned "total time reading" (TTR) as a possible compensation model for paid writers, one reader began his comment by lending his support: "The TTR sounds like a good KPI [key performance indicator] and that is less about the 'writer' and more about the words being relevant to me as a reader." Immediately following that remark, however, he expressed a concern: "TTR could end up being engagement and not really writing." The fear here is that with a successful TTR model, the focus will shift away from the quality of the writing and more on the amount of time spent on a particular article, as if to say there is not necessarily a correlation between quality and engagement. One reader took the opportunity to express some constructive criticism: "I think there needs to be a better way of getting quality posts in front of viewers. The Reading List is good but limited in comparison with Medium's scope. No easy way to discover great new Collections. Top 100 often shows the same stuff (maybe it needs "Today/Week/Month" rather than just "Month"). Love Medium but still trying to figure out how to consume it. So far feels rather random." This is a particularly important point because it suggests that even if someone produces high-quality content—a major goal of the paid collection experiments—there is no guarantee that it will appear on users' feeds and receive the attention it deserves. Another reader echoed this sentiment in his response to the above comment: "Definitely agree. I have seen a lot of awesome posts go into the dark corners. Nothing works.

Even if we keep the article featured it does not garner any extra views." In the section where Hansen discussed the faults behind the experiment's failure, one reader made this suggestion: "Your metrics are valid, but you need to devise a serious weighted algorithm that indicates shareworthiness; not just one aspect at a time. Quantify your goals." Another reader voiced his dissatisfaction with the lack of reception his stories have received, which is something I also noticed in my original self-study: "From the writing side, I joined a month ago and posted 3 times. I've got 5 reads and almost no comments." Yet another reader suggested that a stronger social component could bring Medium more success: "…there's very few ways (at the time of writing) to actively connect with other writers/readers. You can read and comment on others' work but you can't follow them for real-time publishing or "discussion" updates a la Twitter (to my knowledge). This [inability to follow others] seems like a massive oversight." My point in sampling these comments here is to demonstrate that announcements, which have historically been one-way communications, are turned into conversations on Medium—a place where anyone can literally highlight a particular point and offer their opinion on it. Thus, even when an experiment does not succeed, the Medium community can share their own insight on what they think went wrong and offer suggestions for how the Medium staff might avoid making those mistakes in the future. As a company that wishes to grow and succeed, the staff at Medium is likely receptive to this feedback. If the staff is receptive, then the respect they have for leaving the line of communication open under all circumstances could augur well for the future of Medium. Viewed in that light, one might simply regard setbacks like the paid collection experiment as par for the course with any startup.

Nearly two weeks later (June 12, 2014), Medium closed open submissions to publications (formerly "collections"; refer to the glossary for more information), stating that users who

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wanted their work to be featured in publications would now need to be made a writer of that publication by its editor first. Some publications, however, are not open to submissions from new writers: "If a publication would like new writers, they will include contact information on their homepage" (Medium, 2014b). This move to make publications more exclusive was received very poorly by Medium's users. Of the 111 comments made on that announcement, only one was supportive of the change; the remainder were distinctly critical. The announcement—which explains the ways in which users can work with the new publication system without actually giving any reasons for the change—was met with a variety of reactions, ranging from ad hominem attacks ("A selfish…pretentious move, Medium") to incredulity ("I don't believe how you [could] destroy this idea") to a desire to understand more ("…what are the motivations behind these changes?!"; "Why have you ruined the best thing about this site?") to sounding the death knell ("Medium just died for me with this move"; "RIP Medium"; "This change killed the entire lure of Medium") to conspiracy theories ("Another great initial concept ruined by a board meeting") to disavowals of the service ("I'm outta here!"; "…If [you don't roll back this change]…then I'm leaving"). One user, Adam Charles, even wrote a piece for the website Social Media Today entitled "How Medium Killed Its Best Feature: A Data-Driven Love Letter" (Charles, 2014), where he lamented the advent of this update. Yet, even though the prevailing tone of the comments reflected frustration and even anger, some readers added a more constructive dimension to their comments by explaining the reason behind their dissatisfaction. One reader noted, "I loved the fact that I could share my opinion with different groups." Another called the change a problem for new writers, declaring that it would decrease exposure for them. This user concluded with a trenchant remark: "This [update] feels like traditional journalism but automated." Such a remark is especially scathing because it calls Medium's fundamental

premise—that everyone should have a space to write and gain exposure—into question. Another reader, echoing that sentiment, called the move "counterproductive." Despite the display of discontent, however, it is worth noting that Medium chose not to respond to this criticism anywhere on that page (e.g. by revising the body of the announcement or replying with an inline comment). One reader noticed this lack of an official response and called Medium out for it: "Surprised that there is still no word from the folks @Medium about all the feedback." In fact, there is only one comment on the announcement from the Medium account, but it was merely an answer to a generic user query about how the new system works. One can understand the users' frustration—indeed, "counterproductive" seems to be the appropriate word, since it appears that Medium undermined their own fundamental principle of equal opportunity for their contributors with this move.

Some time afterward on August 28, 2014, Medium allowed users to link both their Twitter and their Facebook accounts to their Medium account. The staff noted that this update would be to users' advantage because when their network is expanded, the likelihood of new stories appearing on their homepage is increased. The corollary to that prospect is, of course, that one's own stories will also have a wider audience. In this announcement, the staffers also addressed the question of other pairing options: "…at this time, we are only connecting with Twitter and Facebook" (Medium, 2014c).

Following that update, on October 9, 2014, Medium implemented a new feature that allowed users to import published content from other sources. In this way, a user who runs another blog can easily cross-post their writing onto Medium by accessing the Import interface[2] and pasting the URL. To test how well this tool could handle certain assets, I imported a blog

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[2] Medium. "Import Your Story." https://medium.com/p/import

post from an external website that included rich text (e.g. italics) and inline images. I have

reproduced the original post (Figure 1) and the imported version (Figure 2) below.

Within thirty minutes the SS *Celtic* had traversed the upper bay, slipped the three-mile route of the Narrows, passed the breakwater at the southern tip of Long Island, and pushed out over a smooth sea, bound for Liverpool and the Old World.

The path of the Celtic. Looking south on New York Harbor, from an aerial photograph taken on January 27, 1965. The Statue of Liberty is visible near the middle of the picture. (NYC Municipal Archives)

Figure 1: A passage from a blog post in its original environment[3]

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[3] 239 Days. "239 Days in America | A Social Media Documentary following 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912 | Daily Feature Articles." http://239days.com/features/

Within thirty minutes the SS *Celtic* had traversed the upper bay, slipped the three-mile route of the Narrows, passed the breakwater at the southern tip of Long Island, and pushed out over a smooth sea, bound for Liverpool and the Old World.

The path of the Celtic. Looking south on New York Harbor, from an aerial photograph taken on January 27, 1965. The Statue of Liberty is visible near the middle of the picture. (NYC Municipal Archives)

Originally published at 239Days.com on December 5, 2012.

Figure 2: The same blog post in Figure 1 imported to "draft view"

Not only did the tool perfectly retain all rich text and inline images, but it also neatly appended a note to the end mentioning the blog in which the post originally appeared, a link to the original post, and the date on which that post was published.

Two months later, on December 19, 2014, Medium introduced "Responses"—a way for users to write replies to stories in the form of a stand-alone post. Ostensibly, this feature would

be ideal for users who want to write longer and more complicated responses to stories—

responses that the inline commenting tool may not be sophisticated enough to format properly.

The user has the opportunity to write a response below the story itself, and all existing responses

are displayed beneath that writing space. A screenshot of this interface appears in Figure 3
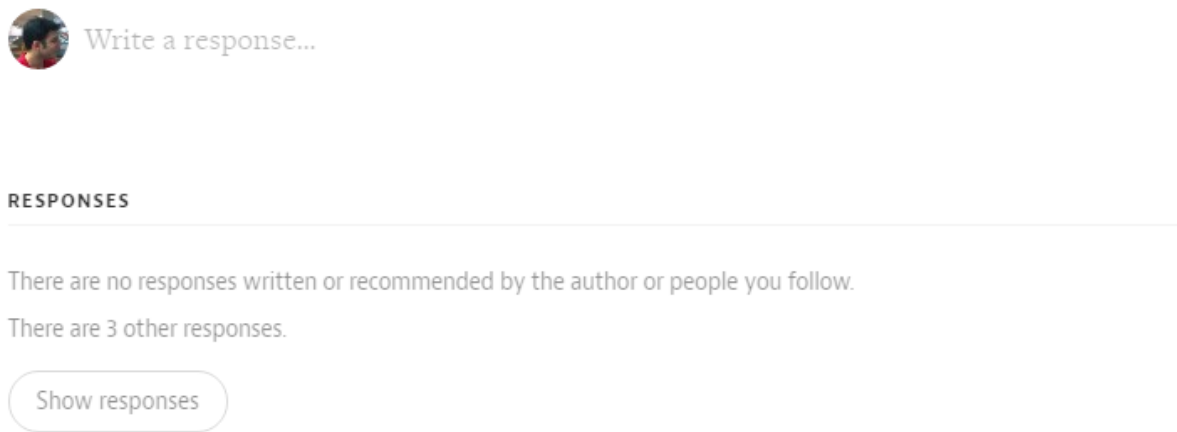
below.

Write a response…

RESPONSES

There are no responses written or recommended by the author or people you follow.

There are 3 other responses.

Show responses

Figure 3: The spaces where one can write and read responses to stories

As with stories, other users are able to recommend responses. When a user recommends

someone's response, their avatar will appear below the response to represent their support for it.

Recommendations also serve as a metric that is reflected in the response-owner's personal

statistics. Furthermore, the fact that responses act as stand-alone posts means that they will

appear in the feeds of the user's followers as well as their daily digest emails, thus giving the

writer another way to give their contributions exposure.

The first substantial update of the new year (February 5, 2015) allowed users to feature

one of their stories on their profile. Featuring a story will pin it to the top of the user's profile,

such that it will not be pushed down their feed with the publication of newer stories. This is a

useful feature for those who wish to cast a spotlight on a particular story and give it more exposure than the rest of their writing.

A few weeks later, on February 24, 2015, Medium made three more changes to their website. Two of these changes were relatively minor—essentially, one of them made it easier to access the Medium editor from the homepage, and the other made the navigation of user profiles a more seamless experience—but the third update introduced tags to Medium. Discoverability of content has always been a major concern among Medium's users, particularly after the June 2014 update that made publications more exclusive, so the positive reaction with which this update was met should come as no surprise. One user declared, "It's about time!" (Medium, 2015a) while another wrote, "Brilliant—Medium will make it super easy for anyone to understand the power of tagging to make their ideas more easily discovered by others (and to discover the ideas of others more easily!)." Indeed, it seems that the introduction of tags was both (a) an acknowledgement that users had legitimate concerns about the exposure stories were receiving, and (b) an effective step in the right direction to remedy the problem the users had identified. A special announcement, dedicated to the introduction of tags, goes into some more detail: "When you click on a tag, it'll take you to the dedicated tag page, where you'll see your story, along with other stories with that tag, in the 'Latest' tab. If enough people Recommend your story, it'll be featured in the 'Top' tab." This is a reference to the "Top" tab of a tag page, shown below in Figure 4.
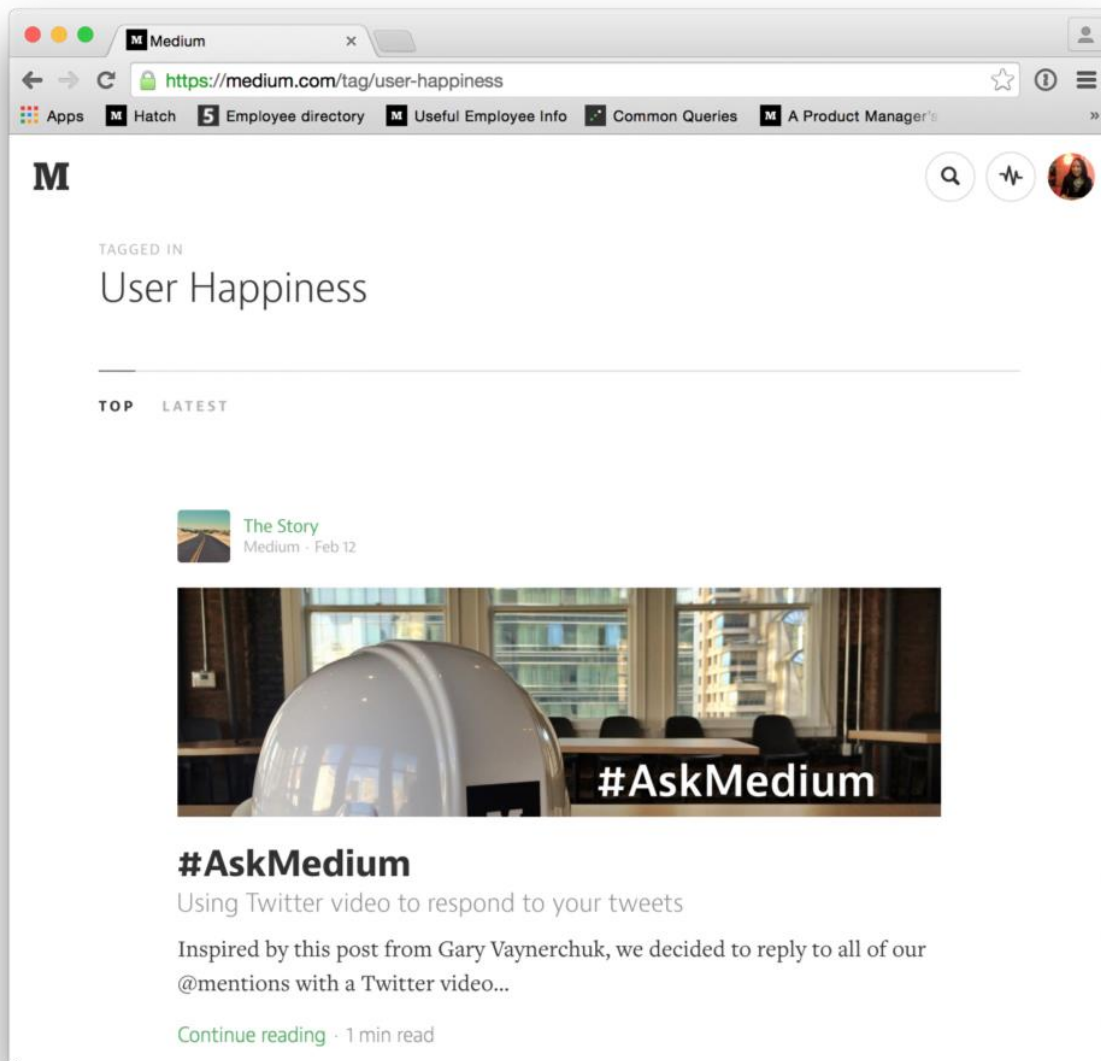
Figure 4: The page for the "user happiness" tag

Following that change, Medium introduced Highlights on March 11. This feature allows

you to select a string of text, highlight it, and append a note to that highlight. Adding notes is

optional, and the notes are private by default to the user who wrote them. The user can, however,

choose to make notes visible to the public if they wish. The author of the story will receive an

alert indicating that a user has left a highlight, which makes the feature a quick and simple way

for someone to signal their appreciation for a certain part of a story. In addition, the number of

highlights associated with strings of texts will appear in the margins. The feature is similar to Amazon's highlighting feature on the Kindle, which denotes a highlighted string of text with a dotted underline and then shows the number of times that string was highlighted. The combination of this metric combined with the highlights themselves means that a reader who gives a story even a cursory glance will immediately be able to tell which parts were most liked by its readers. In this way, Medium has repurposed even the simple act of highlighting— traditionally a solitary act done for one's own benefit—to fit a communal context.

The following week (March 19), Medium made their iPhone and iPad apps more powerful by allowing users to write and publish directly from those devices. This was a significant update insofar as it allowed people to contribute to Medium on those devices in a way that was not possible previously. A few other updates were also bundled with this change—a more compact layout, a new search feature, access to profiles and stats, and support for embedded media in posts—and while each of them does strengthen the Medium experience on iOS, none of them gives the user the kind of power that the ability to post content directly does. Despite these changes, Medium noted that there is still more ground for them to cover in the iOS world: "There's no draft editing yet, but we know it's an important part of writing, and we're working on it!" (Medium, 2015b)

Nearly two months later (May 14), Medium added a layer of sophistication to their tag system by allowing users to "follow" tags. This change means that users who subscribe to a certain tag will see new stories that have published under that tag in their feeds. This update is not only an excellent way to let users customize the kind of content to which they are exposed, but it also allows users to form new communities around shared interests. In strengthening this

social dimension of the service, Medium took a feature that was already useful and made it even more powerful.

Just a few days later (May 19), Nick Fisher—a community manager at Medium—announced a number of enhanced capabilities for Medium's iPhone app. These changes include being able to write, tag, respond to stories, and highlight all from the iPhone, and they allow the user to interact with Medium in a more meaningful way even when they are away from their desks.

A few weeks after that (June 9), Medium introduced a new product called Letters. This is a feature for those who own Publications; these people can use Letters to send messages to all the email addresses of that Publication's followers. Letters are essentially Medium's version of the traditional newsletter, the one key difference being that these Letters also appear publicly on Medium by default.[4] To quote Katie Zhu, the author of the feature's announcement (which is itself a Letter): "When you send your Letter, not only will it be delivered to all the inboxes of your followers, but it will also be published as a post in your publication[,]consumable by anyone on the web and in our iOS app" (Zhu, 2015). That announcement was met with mixed reactions. A number of people welcomed the change eagerly ("In a world where the inbox is the number one used product on the planet, this is an absolute game changer for blogging"; "This is exactly the audience engagement that [M]edium was previously lacking"), while others found it counterintuitive and struggled to make sense of it ("I'd actually prefer for Letters *not*[5] to appear as a public post by default"; "…other than pushing to people's inbox, I don't understand

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[4] In response to a reader's comment on her post, Zhu (2015) noted that Letter-writers can modify the visibility settings of their Letters after the fact: "You could send the letter and then edit the post to be unlisted if you don't want it to show up in feeds."

[5] These asterisks represent emphasis in lieu of proper emphatic devices, such as boldfacing and italics, which Medium's inline commenting feature does not currently support.

how this is any more conversational than a normal post"). It is easy to understand the point this

latter group is making; newsletters are a unilateral means of communication and are thus hardly

conducive to conversation. Still, since Letters are posted to Medium by default, they do present

another means by which publication owners can give their writing more exposure.

Approximately one week later, Medium made their iOS app more sophisticated by

supporting highlight responses and the ability to handle multiple drafts. A highlight response is

simply a story that begins with a piece of text that a user has highlighted. The idea behind this

feature is to let users act on "Eureka! moments" that they may experience while reading a story

on their device, such that they can develop their thoughts on that story into a story of their own at

that very moment. Examples of highlights in a story, as well as a highlight's incorporation into a

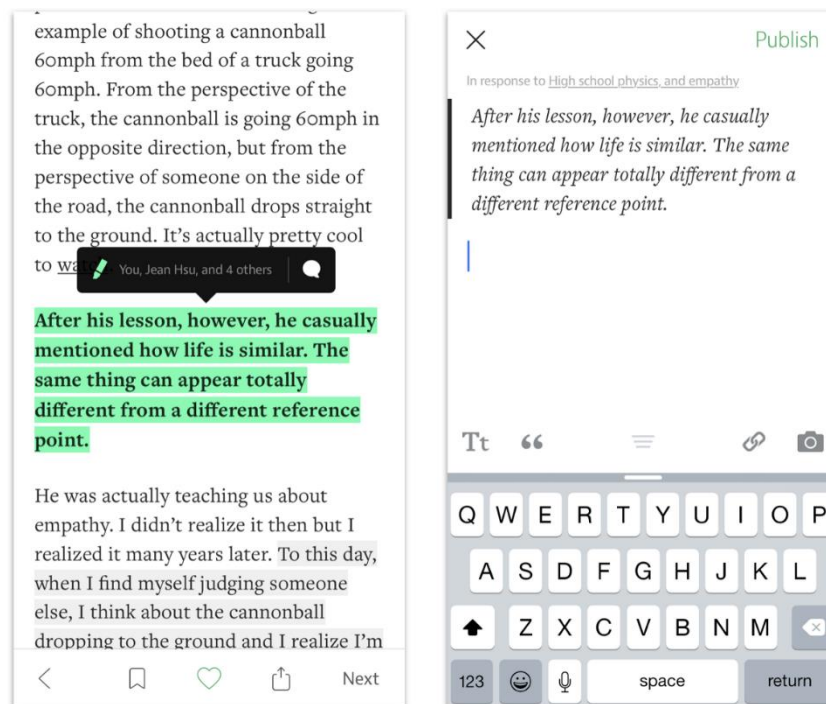new draft, appear below in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Highlighted text (left) can now be the starting point for a new post (right)

Not long afterwards (June 24), Medium finally announced their initial release of an Android app for their service. The announcement for this update—a comical report stating that the app was "released into the wild"—did not mention how, if at all, this Android version differed in its features or functionality from its iOS counterpart. The latest version of the app, released on September 10, is only supported on devices running Android 4.4 or newer. However, over 60% of Android users—over 1 billion in all (Kahn, 2014)—are currently using those operating systems. According to that statistic, 600 million Android users will now be able to use the Medium app on their devices. Initial exposure for the app seems to have been high; according to the app's page on the Google Play store, it has been downloaded somewhere between 100,000 to 500,000 times from July to September 2015 (Google, 2015). These initial impressions have all been largely positive, too—the app has over 5,000 reviews to date and boasts an overall rating of 4.5 out of 5 stars, which is notably higher than the overall average rating of 4.1 for all Android apps (AppBrain, 2015).

Less than a week later (June 29), Medium added a third sign-in option to their service. As of that date, users now have the choice of registering and logging into Medium with their email address. This update is significant in that users who do not have a social media presence—or do not wish to associate that presence with their Medium account—can sign up to the service with just their email address. There is one element of this sign-in option, however, that distinguishes it from others. Users who sign up to Medium with their email address will have to log into the service using a special link that is sent to their inbox after every login attempt. The user will be logged into Medium when they click this link. By implementing this method, Medium has totally rejected the password for this avenue, noting that this special sign-in method is "actually more secure than a password-based system" (Talbot, 2015). The case for its security is clear—this is

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one less password for the user to remember, which also means that they have one less password that can be potentially leaked, and their Medium account will be secure so long as their email account is also secure. Furthermore, each sign-in link can only be used once, and it will expire in fifteen minutes if it is not clicked.

Nearly two months after that update (August 17), Medium expanded its character set to support a wider variety of European languages. Marcin Wichary, who wrote the announcement for this update, wrote, "I'm proud to announce that Medium supports proper typography for European languages" (Wichary, 2015). He elaborated thus, "…as of right now, you can write an aphorism in Azerbaijani, a column in Croatian, an essay in Estonian, a homily in Hungarian, a memoir in Maltese, a novella in Norwegian, a poem in Polish, a screenplay in Slovenian, a sonnet in Swedish, a treatise in Turkish, or, well… write whatever you want in Welsh." He did also add this caveat: "There is still work to do. There will *always* be work to do." Indeed, although this update will likely expand Medium's borders into new territory, speakers of other languages with markedly different orthographies continue to find themselves without much support. According to a Quora post (Quora, n.d.), Medium currently uses Freight Text Pro—a crisp serif font—for its body text. On the Adobe Typekit page for Freight Text Pro (Adobe, n.d.), a variety of European languages are supported, but no non-European languages are listed. When I tried writing a Medium post in Persian, I noticed that the characters were coming out in Times New Roman—apparently the default choice for anything that is not supported by Freight Text Pro. Proper support for right-to-left languages like Persian, moreover, is nonexistent. In the first place, all body text in Medium is aligned to the left by default, which is itself a major impediment to writing in right-to-left languages like Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew. There is an option to center align but not right align, which appears to be a curious choice of form over

function. Yet, even if one could right-align text in Medium, it would be of little significance in the case of right-to-left languages, since what is actually needed is a proper setting to change the text direction—not the alignment—from left-to-right to right-to-left. Such a setting will ensure that the "home" and "end" keys on a user's keyboard will actually take them to the beginnings and ends of their right-to-left sentences (respectively) instead of the other way around, and that periods and other terminal punctuation marks will actually be positioned at the end of a sentence rather than the beginning. Setting text direction, however, is still not a supported feature in Medium. These were the woes of older generations of word processors that have since become more cosmopolitan, so the fact that Medium is still plagued by these problems shows that there is still room for them to improve. To his credit, Wichary (2015) did acknowledge right-to-left languages in his announcement ("Writing left to right? Languages go from right to left, top to bottom, or even somewhere in between"). This may be an indication that Medium is working to support these kinds of alphabets.

The last update that will be covered in this review took place a month later (September 18) when Medium added total mobile editing support on Android. This change means that the aforementioned figure of 100,000 to 500,000 Medium users on Android now have all the same fundamental functionality as their iOS-using counterparts. In addition to writing and editing stories and drafts, this update also includes a new page for writer stats (shown below in Figure 6). To quote Cara Meverden, the author of the announcement, "This simple version of stats will let you stay up to date on how many people are viewing, reading, and recommending your story" (Meverden, 2015).
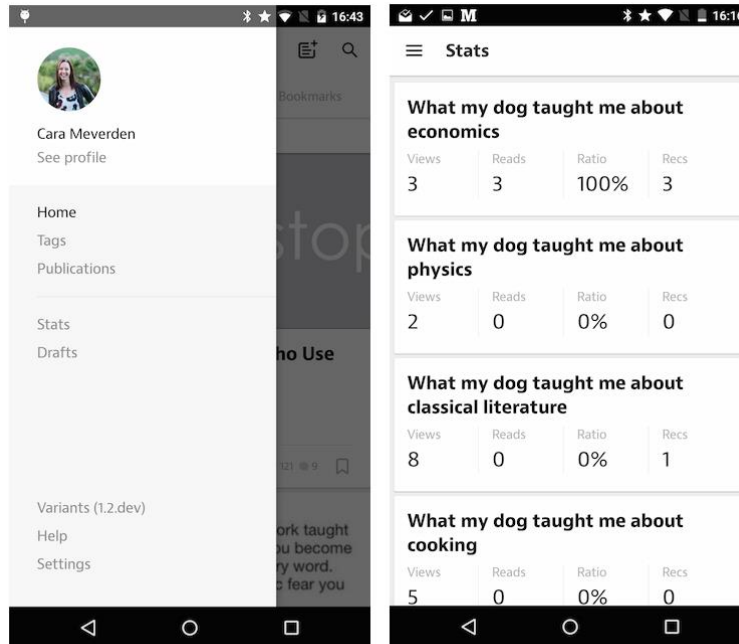
Figure 6: The writer stats page on Android

Section Two: A Survey of Medium's Traffic and Userbase

To properly evaluate Medium's traffic and userbase, I signed up for a free trial with Alexa.com's Advanced plan. Alexa.com is a company that provides web traffic data and analytics for websites. Their Advanced plan is the highest tier among their offerings; it provides extensive data on audience demographics, incoming traffic, and other metrics that are not available on the cheaper plans. Since the Advanced plan was the most comprehensive, and I only needed access to it for a short while, registering for it on a trial basis suited my needs perfectly.

Traffic. With Alexa's Advanced plan, I was able to track the site's traffic—as measured by Alexa's Traffic Rank tool—to September 23, 2012, just one month after the site launched.
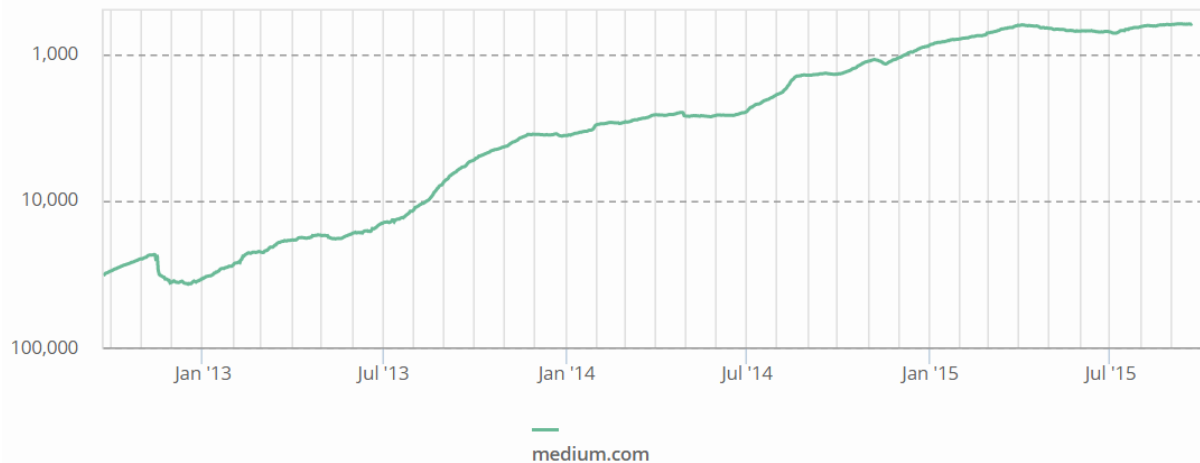
Figure 7: Medium's traffic rank over the past three years

The above graph indicates that Medium's exposure has been steadily increasing from day one. On September 23, 2012, Medium had a global Alexa Traffic Rank[6] of 32,280; when I first began my research of the site in February 2014, that rank had escalated all the way to 3,008; at the conclusion of that preliminary research in May 2014, it had risen to 2,636; and as of this date (September 23, 2015), Medium enjoys a place in the top 1,000 most globally visited websites at rank 617. For a blogging site to embark on such a meteoric rise in only three years is an unprecedented accomplishment; none of Medium's competitors (mentioned below in Section Four) experienced such pronounced success so quickly. This progress seems to suggest that notwithstanding Medium's relative lack of coverage in the media, it has clearly been able to make a significant impact in the online community and expand its audience through other means. That progress, moreover, shows little sign of abating; its rank, for instance, improved by nearly one-hundred positions over the past three months.

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[6] The global Traffic Rank is Alexa's metric for measuring a website's popularity around the world. They measure this popularity combining a site's page views and their unique users over three-month periods.

In that vein, the number of estimated unique visitors,[7] estimated visits,[8] and estimated pageviews[9] that Medium receives on a monthly basis is similarly impressive. From August 21 to September 21, 2015, Medium received 6,359,058 estimated unique visitors, 11,856,044 estimated visits, and 23,213,669 estimated pageviews. It is no small accomplishment for a site that is only three years old to receive more than twenty million pageviews every month.

The data becomes even more interesting when we delve deeper into Medium's engagement metrics. For instance, the average number of pageviews per user—depicted below in Figure 8—is currently just two.
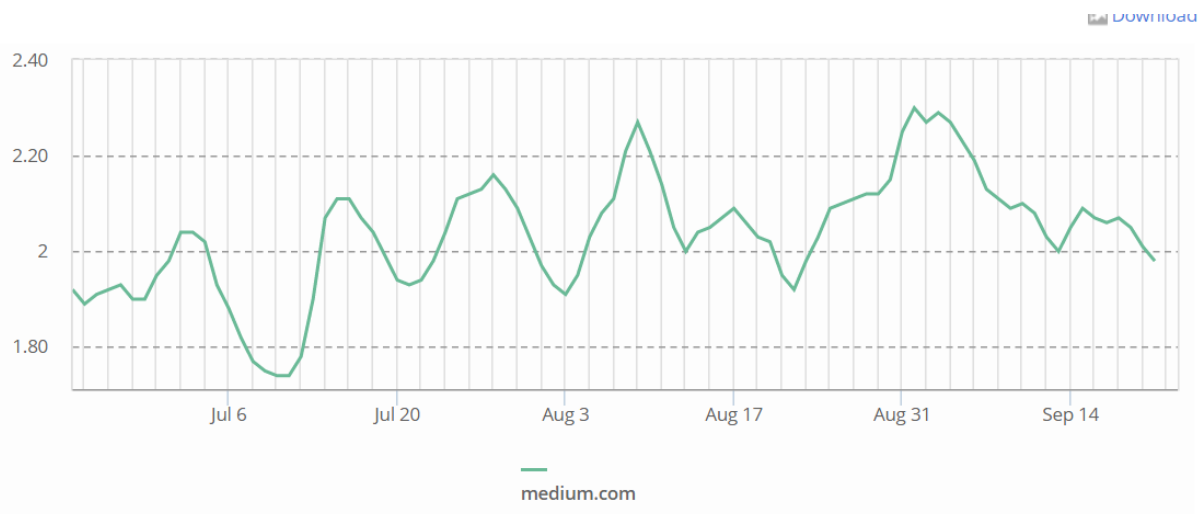

Figure 8: A three-month graph depicting the average number of pageviews per user on Medium

It is clear, then, that the average visitor is not doing very much browsing on Medium. This is an unsurprising fact, however, considering Medium does not have a deep site map; the user cannot go to many places on the site if they are not reading a story or writing one of their

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[7] "The estimated number of unique people that visited a site from the selected country over the past 30 days" (Alexa, 2015).

[8] "The estimated number of visits to this site over the past 30 days. A visit is a single browsing session, meaning the visitor used the site with no breaks longer than 30 minutes. A single visitor may have made multiple visits" (Alexa, 2015).

[9] "The estimated number of pageviews for this site over the past 30 days. A pageview is recorded whenever a full page of the website is viewed or refreshed. Partial page refreshes don't count as a pageviews. A single visit may consist of multiple pageviews" (Alexa, 2015).

own. A more surprising statistic, illustrated below in Figure 9, is the average amount of time users spend on Medium—a meager two minutes and forty-two seconds.
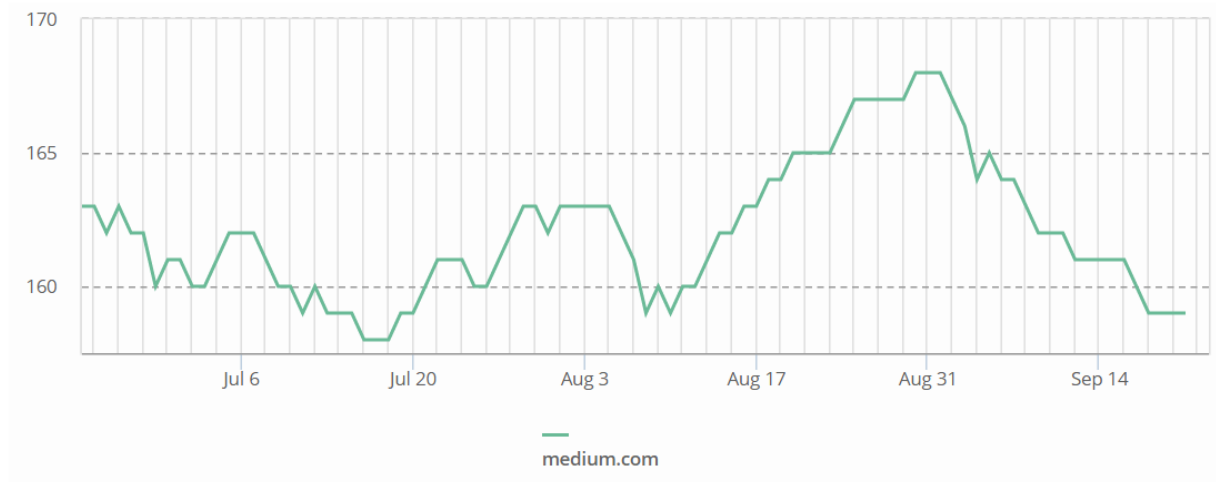

Figure 9: A three-month graph depicting the average number of seconds spent on Medium

According to these two statistics, it would seem that the average user is visiting Medium to quickly find a short piece, read it, and then leave the site. Based on those statistics, it is unlikely that the average user is reading lengthy stories or writing such stories of their own. One interesting trend, shown below in Figure 10, is that the average user spent more time on Medium during the site's first few months (peaking at three minutes and forty-five seconds on November 16, 2012) than over the last two and a half years. However, that might have more to do with the site's novelty wearing off over time. Other blogging platforms, however, hold higher averages of time spent despite the fact that they have been around longer than Medium. Additional research with Alexa reveals that the average Wordpress user is currently averaging about 3 minutes spent there, Blogger has 7 minutes, and Tumblr boasts an average of 11 minutes. It is difficult to pinpoint this variance in engagement to any one cause, since each service uses different blogging formats and operates on different business models. It is, therefore, not clear whether Medium's

relatively low engagement is due to its unique approach to blogging, the way its content is laid

out, or some other factor entirely.

Figure 10: A three-year graph depicting the average amount of time (seconds) spent on Medium.

 Userbase. Now that we have a more palpable sense of how Medium's popularity has

risen over the years, it would be similarly helpful to analyze the various demographics of its

incoming users. To begin with, while Alexa notes that the audience for Medium among both

males and females is similar to the general internet population, it appears that Medium attracts

more women than it does men. To be more precise, the number of men on Medium accounts for

roughly 45% relative to the Internet average, while the number of women accounts for about
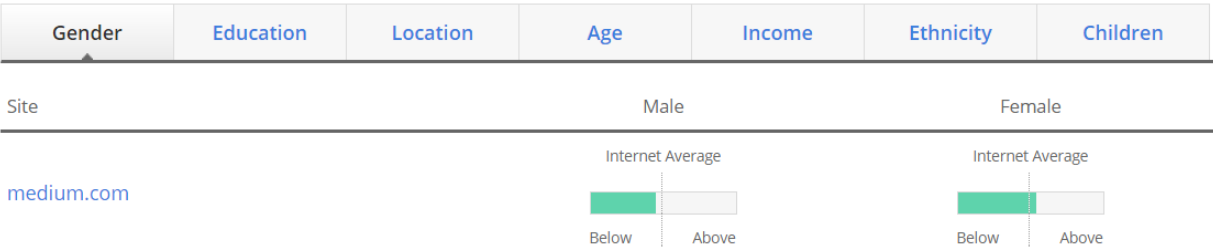
55%. This statistic appears below in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Medium attracts a slightly higher number of female users than the internet average

The next metric Alexa measures is the users' level of education, which is depicted below in Figure 12. Based on the statistics, it seems the average Medium user is either moderately or highly educated. Medium attracts a slightly higher number of people with a college education than the internet average and an even higher number of people who went to graduate school. According to Alexa's evaluation of these metrics, people who did not go to college—or only received some college education—are under-represented at Medium (~25% and ~40% relative to the internet average, respectively); the number of Medium users who finished college is similar to the internet average (just over 50%); and people who went to graduate school are over-represented at Medium (close to 60%).
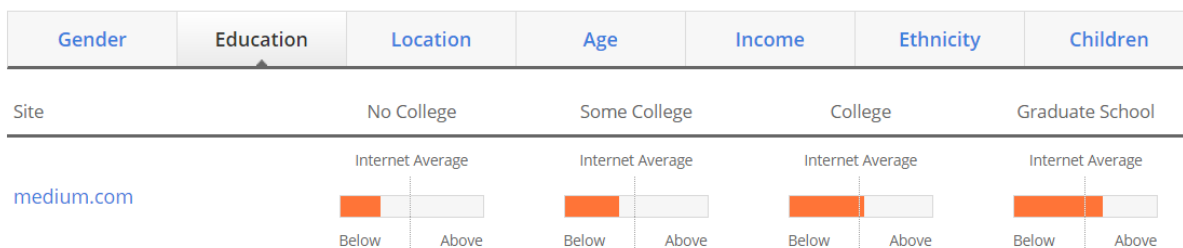
Figure 12: The varying levels of education Medium's users have received

The next metric is location—that is, the places where people are browsing Medium—illustrated below in Figure 13. The statistics indicate that the number of users who access Medium from home is very similar to the general population (just over 50% relative to the internet average); the number accessing it from school is greatly under-represented (~15%); and the number accessing it from work is over-represented (~55%).

	Gender	Education	Location	Age	Income	Ethnicity	Children
Site			Home		School		Work
medium.com			Internet Average (Below/Above)		Internet Average (Below/Above)		Internet Average (Below/Above)

Figure 13: People mostly access Medium from work, while hardly anyone does from school

Moving on to the next metric, age, which often yields interesting insights about a website's userbase. In Medium's case, the users are mostly below the age of 45. The number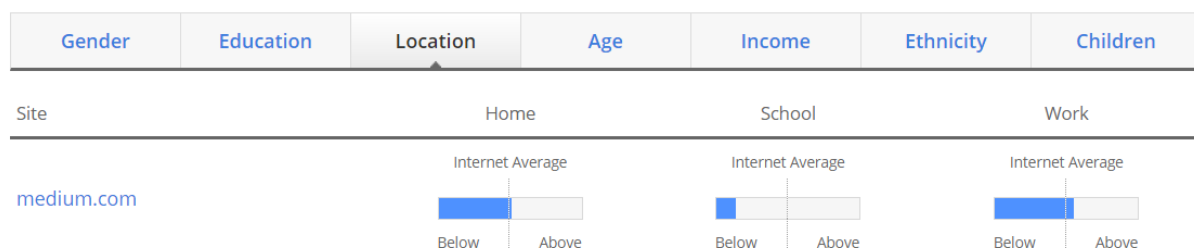 of users aged 18–24 is similar to the general internet population (just over 50% relative to the internet average); people aged 25–34 are over-represented (~55%); the number of 35–44-year-olds is similar to the general internet population (just over 50%); and people aged 45–54, 55–64, and 65 or older are all under-represented (~45%, ~40%, and ~40%, respectively). Figure 14 below represents this distribution.

	Gender	Education	Location	Age	Income	Ethnicity	Children
Site	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
medium.com	Internet Average (Below/Above)	Internet Average (Below/Above)	Internet Average (Below/Above)	Internet Average (Below/Above)	Internet Average (Below/Above)	Internet Average (Below/Above)	
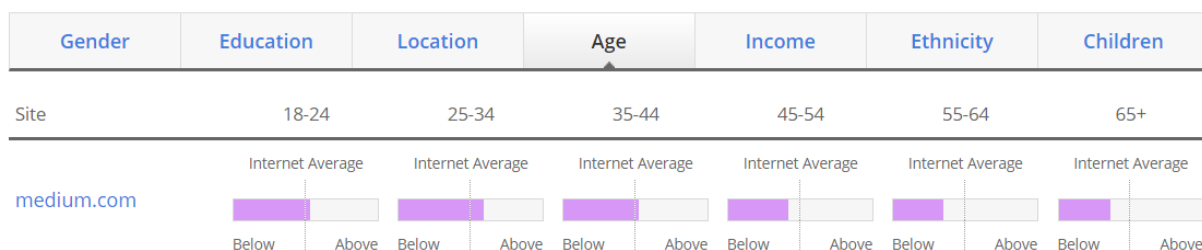
Figure 14: The age distribution on Medium.com tends toward the younger end of the spectrum

The next metric, income, is not as straightforward to read. All of Medium's users who fall under Alexa's measured income brackets—0–30k, 30–60k, 60–100k, or >100k—match the numbers of the general internet population. It is, therefore, difficult to declare with any real accuracy how much the average Medium user makes in a year. If we analyze the graph carefully (refer to Figure 15 below), however, we can discern that the number of Medium users who fall in the 30–60k and >100k income brackets are slightly more represented than the general internet

population (both just over 50% relative to the internet average), while the users who make 0–30k or 60–100k are relatively less represented (both just under 50%). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the average Medium user is more likely to be in the upper or lower middle class than the middle or working class.[10]
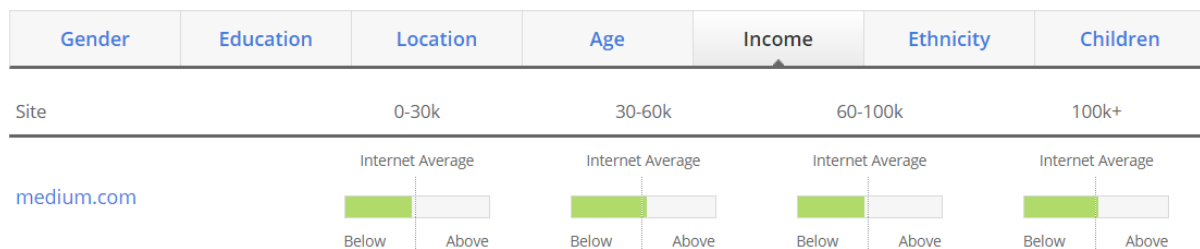
		Gender	Education	Location	Age	Income	Ethnicity	Children

Site		0-30k	30-60k	60-100k	100k+
medium.com		Internet Average Below ▐ Above	Internet Average Below ▐ Above	Internet Average Below ▐ Above	Internet Average Below ▐ Above

Figure 15: The mostly even distribution of Medium users' levels of income

The next metric measured is ethnicity, an easier metric to read than income. The statistics, depicted below in Figure 16, show that Africans, Asians, Middle Easterners, and people of "Other" descent are all under-represented on Medium (~33%, ~25%, ~33%, and ~40% relative to the internet average); the numbers for African-Americans and Hispanics are similar to the general internet population (just under 50% and just over 50%, respectively); and Caucasians are extremely over-represented (nearly 100%).

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[10] I have derived my ranges for these terms from William Thompson & Joseph Hickey (2005) and Leonard Beeghley (2004).

| | | Gender | | Education | | Location | | Age | | Income | | Ethnicity | | Children | |

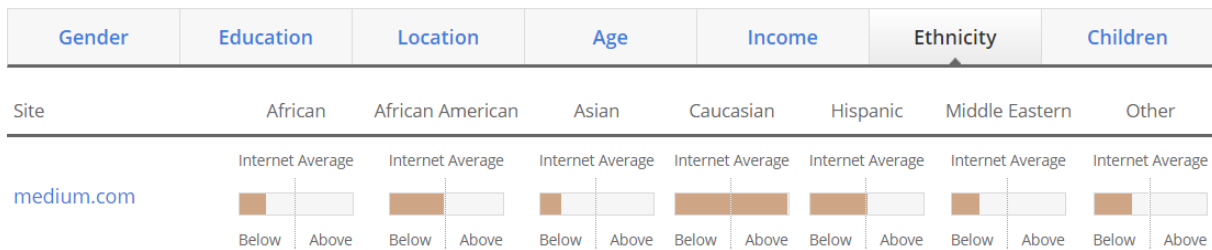| Site	African	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Middle Eastern	Other
	Internet Average	Internet Average	Internet Average	Internet Average	Internet Average	Internet Average	Internet Average
medium.com							
	Below · Above	Below · Above	Below · Above	Below · Above	Below · Above	Below · Above	Below · Above

Figure 16: Relative to other ethnicities, the number of Caucasians on Medium is astronomically high

The final metric in Alexa's "Demographics" section, shown below in Figure 17, assesses whether or not a given user has children. This statistic is the most straightforward of all to interpret because it has the fewest number of parameters—one either has children or does not. The statistics indicate that users with children are under-represented on Medium (~40% relative to the internet average) while users without children are over-represented (~75%).
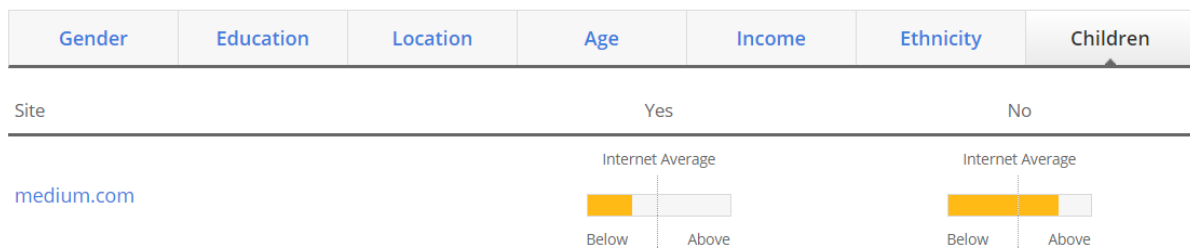

| Gender | Education | Location | Age | Income | Ethnicity | Children |

Site	Yes	No
	Internet Average	Internet Average
medium.com		
	Below · Above	Below · Above

Figure 17: The average Medium user probably does not have children

Alexa does have one other metric that is useful to this self-study, Audience Geography, which offers a look at where Medium's users are located throughout the world. According to the data, represented below in Figure 18, most of Medium's visitors are located in the United States; India holds second place. Brazil, United Kingdom, and Canada are ranked third, fourth, and fifth respectively, but they comprise a small percentage of Medium's userbase with the lower-ranked countries occupying increasingly negligible shares of the total sum.

Visitors by Country
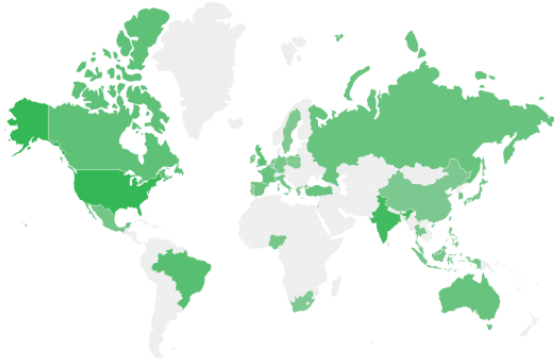
Country	Percent of Visitors	Rank in Country
🇺🇸 United States	28.2%	554
🇮🇳 India	15.0%	363
🇧🇷 Brazil	5.1%	535
🇬🇧 United Kingdom	3.7%	563
🇨🇦 Canada	3.6%	357

More

Figure 18: Medium seems to have its biggest following in the United States and India

Using the foregoing statistics, we are now able to paint a clearer picture of who is most likely to use Medium. It seems that the average Medium user is highly educated, between the ages of 18 and 44, and Caucasian. Moreover, they probably live in America, access Medium from home or work, and do not have any children. It is more difficult to determine the average user's salary and sex, since the statistics for those metrics very closely resemble those of the general internet population. It is slightly more likely, however, for the average user to be female and to make either 30–60k or >100k a year.

Section Three: Revisiting the Review of Medium's Participatory Aspects

On pp. 2–7 of my original self-study, I reviewed a number of Medium's participatory aspects (Jenkins, 2006), but I neglected to elaborate on the effect that my own appropriation had on the site. I will discuss that effect here in brief detail.

I kept most of my engagement on Medium at the surface level, and I often had to wait a long time before I saw the consequences of that engagement. One of the ways in which I tried to participate in the Medium community, for instance, was by creating a collection (since renamed

to publications) of my own. I wanted to create a personal space where I could not only feature my own stories, but also those of others that fit the theme of my choosing. I had hoped, moreover, that something would have come of this request before concluding my original self-study. However, it was not until several months after that date (May 2014) that I received an alert from Medium indicating that my request to create that collection had finally been approved.

In the same vein, I also submitted one of my stories, "Isolated Immersion" (Masumian, 2014b), to a collection about parenting in the hope that the story would be approved before May 2014. In so doing, my goal was to see what effect the inclusion of my story in another collection would have on the story's exposure. While the editor did eventually approve the story, it was not for several months after I had already concluded the original self-study. Using the stats page as a reference, I see that after one year (September 2014 to September 2015), "Isolated Immersion" has gained six views, two of which were complete reads. When I concluded my original self-study, that story did not have any views at all. Thus, it appears that the story's inclusion in another collection garnered some—if minimal—exposure for it.

If we look at the foregoing list of updates, we will see that there are more ways to interact with Medium in September 2015 than there were when I conducted my original self-study. There are practical implications for many of these updates, since they empower users to increase exposure for their stories. If the user properly avails themselves of those updates, they can accomplish their publishing and readership goals more easily. To that end, I will list some best practices below, based both on the behavior I have observed on Medium and on my own engagement with it.

First, even though Medium is a blogging platform, it should not be used as a personal diary. This is a common application of the traditional blog, but it is an application that is

fundamentally incompatible with the purpose of Medium, which is a communal and outward-facing space. In such a space where people prefer to write about and discuss substantive topics, it is difficult to establish connections with others if the sole focus of one's stories is one's personal life. While that content is more appropriate for platforms like Blogger and Livejournal, users on Medium will meet it with less receptivity. Instead, the content a user publishes on Medium should touch on issues that hold appeal to a more general audience. Even if the user chooses to write about niche subjects, they may be able to find a relevant publication where their stories can appear or perhaps even be featured.

Second, and dovetailing with the previous point, the user should find the publication that is right for them. Stories are likely to receive more exposure if they appear in thematically relevant publications. The reason for this tendency is that publications have a following that will see newly published stories on their main news feeds, since the feeds are tailored to users' personal interests. Of course, the main hurdle the user will face with this best practice is whether or not they will be selected as the writer of a publication. If there is a publication to which the user is particularly interested in contributing, they should contact the owner to see if they are open to accepting new writers. The prospective writer's chances of being accepted will be higher if their Medium portfolio already contains quality content. It is best to look for publications that are active (with most topics, at least one story a week is healthy) and host content that is similar to your own.

Third, it is important to engage with other stories. Medium is a community, after all, and it will reflect well on users if they make an effort to participate in that community. As outlined above, readers of a story can express their thoughts in a variety of ways. Depending on how rich they want their interaction with the writer of the story and other Medium community members to

be, the user can simply "like" the story, highlight certain parts of it, leave inline comments about it, or write a full-fledged response to it. In using one or more of these methods, the user will not only demonstrate their interest in engaging with the community at large, but they will also gain a reputation as an actively involved community member. If that reputation follows them across the site and continues to improve with regular activity, the user may experience greater exposure for their stories as a result.

Fourth, sharing the URLs to one's stories on social media will definitely help with increasing exposure. One obvious reason is that the user is exposing new audiences to their content. Another reason sharing on social media is effective is that these platforms hold an exponentially rising degree of sharing power. When a user shares a Medium story to Facebook, that user's friends may also share the story with their own groups of friends. The more appealing the story is to these people, the more it will be shared on Facebook, meaning it will be exposed to an ever-increasing audience. This sharing functionality is present on most other popular social networks, too, such as Twitter and LinkedIn. The main conclusion we can draw from this observation is that stories shared on social media have the potential to undergo one or more rounds of exposure. This process will create a self-sustaining cycle for the story that is absent when the user simply posts it to Medium without sharing it on social media afterwards.

Fifth, the user must take great care to label their stories with the appropriate tags. Tags play a key role in the discoverability of content, so if they are used properly, it is likely that a story will gain increased exposure as a result. To follow this best practice, it would be ideal for the user to find stories that cover subjects similar to the ones they want to write about. If those stories stand out as particularly successful—perhaps if they appear on the front page, have a few hundred likes, or hold many inline comments—then the user should note the relevant tags that

person used and then apply them to their own stories. In so doing, the user can avoid having to come up with tags on their own and instead use existing tags that are demonstrably effective.

All of these practices are conducive to increased exposure on Medium. The user may also want to make other considerations, such as the length of their stories and the time of day they post them to Medium (and subsequently share them on social media), but these factors will differ across audiences. For instance, some people prefer brief stories that take just a few minutes to read while some are partial to longform pieces that may take half an hour or more to finish. As for when to post, that will depend on their audience's peak hour. These and similar considerations are more subjective than the five listed above; yet, the user must also engineer them properly to secure maximum exposure for their stories.

Section Four: A Review of Medium's Competition

Given Medium's exponential rise in popularity, it bears a comparison to competing platforms to see where Medium stands.

To begin with, there are the traditional blogging engines, such as Blogger and Wordpress. While those services do offer a space for content creation, there is little in the way of building social rapport through their features. Typically, the most social features supported by the sites are commenting on posts and following the blog owners. Tumblr, a microblogging service, offers interesting features on top of those—such as "liking" and reblogging posts—that set it apart from more conventional platforms. Its social dimension, however, is still not as powerful as Medium's. Furthermore, as a microblogging service, Tumblr is innately ill suited to longform content whereas Medium's catalog features a healthy balance of shorter and longer pieces.

In shifting the focus to more recent competition, one finds much the same phenomenon. In the first place, there is a surprising lack of such competition. The closest competitor I could

find was a blogging service called Svbtle (ostensibly pronounced "subtle"). Like Medium, Svbtle

is a minimalist publishing platform that features a smooth and highly streamlined interface. The

similarities to Medium, however, end there. To begin with, Svbtle is not a free service. When it

launched in 2011, one could only register by invitation. The site was eventually opened up to the

public for free membership in January 2014; however, that model changed on August 18, 2014,

when the site moved to a paid subscription model ($6/month), though a free two-week trial is

offered to registrants. Unsurprisingly, the exclusivity that comes with being a paid service means

that Svbtle receives considerably less traffic than similar free services. While Medium's global

Alexa rank is 617, Svtble's lags far behind at 53,138. Setting aside the paywall and the

comparatively meager traffic, however, one can see upon further observation that Svtble does not

even appear to be a social service. For instance, the peak of user engagement with a piece is to

give it kudos—essentially a "like" feature—or to subscribe to a blogger. There is no

highlighting, no inline commenting, and no opportunity whatsoever to respond to a post—none

of the hallmarks of a more sophisticated social world are present in Svbtle. Having said that,

there is one benefit Svbtle offers that Medium does not yet have—customizable domain names.

With Svbtle, it seems you can choose from memorable domain names that have not yet been

registered by others. To use an example, Daniel Curtis—the founder of Svbtle—hosts his blog at

the URL http://dcurt.is. While these "domain hacks" are perhaps more memorable than the

average URL, and hence may help increase exposure, it hardly seems like the sort of redeeming

feature that would sway someone on the fence to choose Svbtle over Medium. Furthermore,

other competitors beat Svbtle even in this feature. Wordpress users who are willing to pay

$18/year can host their blog at any available .com domain name. Compared to Svbtle's rate of

$6/month, or $72/year, Wordpress's pricing is definitely the better deal.

It would seem, then, that even three years after its launch, Medium still seems to be the best service in its relatively unoccupied field of communal blogging, and that it does not face any real competition at present.

Section Five: Conclusion

When I concluded my original self-study in May 2014, I remarked that, "one cannot simply write about any topic of their choosing on Medium and necessarily expect it to get wide exposure" (13), suggesting that "undue attention [was being] given to stories about entrepreneurship" (13) and that stories about other topics faced neglect as a result. At the time, that was my strongest critique of Medium, but it does not seem to be as relevant today. Thanks to the updates that have taken place over the past year, users' news feeds are now more attuned to the publications to which they have subscribed—that is, the content that appears in the former is influenced by what is published in the latter. This attention to customizability, along with the implementation of effective tags and other methods for boosting a story's discoverability, has helped create an environment where content can gain exposure more easily than before. With even a cursory glance at my news feed now (a standard feed, since I subscribe only to one inactive publication), although I can still see stories about entrepreneurship, the subject is not nearly as over-represented as it was last year. Among the list now are commentaries on world news, parenting, technology, and gender studies, to name just a few. This increased variety in content is refreshing, and it reflects Medium's determined push to feature a broader range of content—a path I had eagerly hoped they would pursue. In addition, the availability of Medium on mobile and tablet platforms has made the site more accessible to users in their everyday settings. As one might expect, these updates have led to exponentially higher site traffic. Perhaps

this increased popularity affirms that this triple emphasis on inclusivity, customizability, and discoverability is steering Medium in the right direction.

Although these recent developments bode well for Medium's future, I think there is ample room for them to benefit from viable competition. As is commonly known, competition is a key driver of innovation, so the advent of a worthy rival may give Medium the impetus to become stronger over time. Today, however, Medium is still the most sophisticated communal blogging platform available, and it has since become—to paraphrase my closing words from the original self-study—an even more effective contender in the participatory web than it had already proven itself to be.

Glossary

Medium.com uses a unique set of terms whose meanings may not be immediately obvious to the reader. Therefore, I have included this brief list of key terms that recur throughout the report, to which the reader may refer when necessary.

Story: A published piece of content on Medium. Stories are essentially Medium's name for blog posts.

Collection: The former name for Publications. The Medium staff made this name change in June 2014, after I wrote Part One of the report but before I wrote Part Two. This is the reason for the sudden shift in terminology between Part One and Part Two.

Publication: A set of published stories. Medium users may subscribe to Publications to keep abreast of new content. Publications are created by an Owner, who may then appoint Editors and Writers for their publication.

Editor: A person who is appointed by the owner of a Publication to approve or reject new stories that are submitted to that Publication. Submissions must be made by a Writer of that Publication; they are not open to the public.

Writer: A person who has been handpicked by an Owner or Editor to contribute stories to their Publication. Once submitted, an Editor will review the Writer's stories and decide whether to approve or reject them.

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