

# Confessions of a tech blogging grandmother



Lori MacVittie, 2009-01-05

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Toni Bowers, Head Blogs Editor at [TechRepublic](#), had quite an [interesting blog](#) on the subject of women tech bloggers, “Sure she’s a good tech blogger, but what does she look like?” The comments are as interesting as the content, to be sure, as the responses come from a mostly male community.

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## MOST MEN AREN'T JERKS AFTER ALL

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Now, Toni asks why men care about – and comment on – women’s looks as part of their feedback (and in some cases, as their only feedback). After all, you rarely see commentary about a man’s appearance in blog comments.

I have to ask what the percentage of responses/comments in any given blog contain such references. I’ve been writing for a *long* time and while I’ve received some vitriol-filled e-mail focusing on gender, I’ve only once seen a blog response (and that was elsewhere) that discussed physical appearance. And reading through other female tech-bloggers’ commentary I don’t see a whole lot of appearance/gender-based commentary either. Yes, there are some, as Toni points out, but the majority of commentary doesn’t appear to bring up the subject at all.

While blogging for [F5](#) here on [DevCentral](#) I’ve never seen a single comment focusing on looks or gender. Not one. Not even during some fairly heated debate. At [Network Computing](#) I received exactly two e-mail responses from readers that specifically called out – and attacked – gender. The percentage of responses *that* made up is insignificant. It doesn’t even register at 0.01%. That says to me, at least anecdotally, that **most men aren’t** jerks after all.

Granted, a blogger at [TechRepublic](#) or [NetworkWorld](#) or [InformationWeek](#) is going to see a lot more traffic. Therefore the chances that they will encounter one or more of the jerks that are out there is much higher than it is for me or other less prominent female tech bloggers. When you expose yourself like that, you have to expect that some people are going to respond who will be jerks. It’s inevitable.

This is not a new phenomenon. I’m certain that were we to put some historical thought into modern words that there were more than a few men who said of [Marie Curie](#), “She certainly induces a chemical reaction in me!” or “What a nice pair of protons *she* has!” At least until she started glowing with the radiation poisoning. That probably freaked them out. Just sayin’.

[I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again](#): a certain percentage of the general population (both male *and* female) is bound to be jerks. It stands to reason, then, that a similar percentage of the technical population is also bound to be jerks. But that percentage is comparatively small when compared against the number of people with whom we interact on any given day. Toni points out that she found “sexist” commentary in several blogs, but she didn’t mention how many *other comments* there were on those blogs that *weren’t*. What’s the ratio, really? Probably pretty close to what you’d find in “real” life.

So if you want to know why it is that some men comment on looks or treat women tech bloggers inherently different here’s the answer: some people are jerks. Mystery solved.

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## IT’S ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

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Many of the comments in response to Toni's blog ask, "Why do you post a picture then?" Good question. After all, if we didn't post pictures then perhaps even those few "jerks" might not have anything to say.

But why shouldn't we? After all, it adds that "human" element we are told is so very important. It's easier for people to connect with a writer when they can *see* them, for some reason. And men post their photos, so why shouldn't women? Does anything about my blog change because now there's a photo in it? No, it doesn't. What I said yesterday about [application delivery](#) and last week about [network-side pre-fetching](#) and last month about [control and choice in cloud computing](#) without a photo included still holds true today.

Photos also clear up the assumption that most technical blogs are written by men – which admittedly happens more often than not because the reality is that technology is still largely male dominated. It also puts some context around the "personal" tidbits that are often an integral part of blogs. If I confess that this blog is written by a grandmother, you might make certain assumptions that probably include something about education and experience in technology cause, you know, grandmothers are *old*. Without a photo if I confess I play Dungeons & Dragons you might assume I'm a geeky, anti-social male, because that's the stereotype. A photo helps put these two very different aspects of "me" into context: I'm not that old and I'm certainly not male.

Context. It's all about providing context and a connection with a real person behind the words. The same reason male bloggers post a photo is the reason female bloggers post photos. We aren't inviting commentary on our appearance by posting them any more than men are; we're trying to provide context. Mystery solved.

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## STOP FEEDING THE TROLLS

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Putting yourself in front of an audience, whether it's physically or digitally or in print, requires that you accept the reality of negative feedback, especially if you touch on something controversial or near and dear to a technologist. Some of that feedback is going to be rather juvenile, perhaps sexist, and often downright rude. But it's only *some* of it, a small percentage of the total. Calling attention to the [few jerks out there just encourages them](#); they feed off the attention like a child that acts out purposefully when you aren't paying attention to them.

So let's stop giving headlines and mindshare to them. Let's stop complaining that "men" can't seem to see past our gender or looks based on a handful of trolls and thus castigating an entire gender. Let's remember instead on the fact that **most men** accept without question and hesitation our right to be in high-tech, our abilities, and our competencies. The percentage of men who comment and stay 'on-topic', as it were, says far more about how men feel about "women tech bloggers" than the responses of a few jerks out there. When we write blogs and articles complaining about the actions of a few rogue men we are guilty of doing essentially the same thing we're complaining about: we're stereotyping, we're pigeonholing, we're being sexist; we're focusing on gender when that really shouldn't be part of the conversation at all.

Most men in technology are not jerks and they really don't care about looks or gender or age *when it comes to a conversation about technology*.

And for those who do, well, *get off my digital lawn or I'll cast magic missile in your general direction*.



- [Sexist and Offensive](#)
- [Sure, she's a good tech blogger, but what does she look like?](#)
- [It Takes a Village Idiot: The Jerks of Online Forums](#)

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